

Prologue: Remembering

PAIN.

In his 10+ years of life Harry Potter had become well acquainted with many types of pain. The dull ache of bruised ribs, the biting sting of open belt wounds on his back, even the awkward ache and occasional sharp pains that came from broken bones; all had become commonplace for Harry Potter at the hand of his so-called family.

The first few times that it had happened Harry thought it must have been something he did. When he was 5 and his uncle had knocked him into a wall for being underfoot, Harry had simply figured he had done something bad and deserved it. When he had come from school a year later with a bloody nose courtesy of his cousin Dudley, his Aunt had screamed at him for getting blood on the carpet and his uncle had added a split lip and bruised ribs to his collection of injuries. As he lay in his cupboard that night he wondered why he had been punished when it was clearly Dudley's fault, so he decided to ask his uncle.

When he asked his uncle the next afternoon why he was punished and Dudley wasn't, his uncle picked him up by the neck and slammed his head into a wall repeatedly, yelling that he was a "worthless freak," and should never ever compare himself to Dudley, as he was a better person than Harry could ever hope to be. That night, Harry had felt his uncle's belt for the first time and was left bleeding in his cupboard for the entire weekend without food.

He never asked again.

When Harry turned seven, his uncle had celebrated by forcing him to clean the entire house with a broken arm (again courtesy of Dudley), and rewarded him by breaking two ribs and accusing him of being too slow. That night, as he lay in agony with pieces of his rib poking his internal organs, Harry asked God to take him from this horrible house and give him a real family that would love him. If this was too much, Harry asked God to at least have mercy and let him die. God didn't grant his prayer. Instead, Harry awoke the next morning with no broken bones and all his bruises gone. Unfortunately, when his Uncle

saw how that he had been somehow healed, he screamed bloody murder about how “freakish and unnatural” it was, and proceeded to re-break the two ribs and beat Harry with his belt until he passed out from the pain.

Harry never asked God for anything again.

When Harry returned to school following the healing incident, he decided to risk telling a teacher that he was being beaten at home. His teacher looked skeptical, and instantly Harry knew he had made a mistake. When his Aunt and Uncle had returned from the parent teacher conference they’d been called to attend, Harry’s uncle had taken a knife to his throat and threatened to kill him if he ever told another soul.

Harry never asked an adult for help again.

By the time he was 8, Harry had accepted that pain was a major part of his life. In a way, pain and his relatives loathing were the only things he could count on. Every day he was either in pain from a recent beating, or he was wondering when his next beating would come. If he was late, he got beaten. If he was early, he got beaten. If he was too loud, too fast, too slow, or too happy, he got beaten. If he screamed loud enough to disturb his Aunt when he was getting beaten, he was beaten some more. And so, the young boy learned to move swiftly and silently, and to disappear immediately. He did nothing extraordinary, got average grades, had no friends, and never went out to play. He never got angry, never yelled, never cried, and he never smiled. By the middle of his 8th year, Dudley and his gang of bullies had even given up pushing Harry around because they never got a response. Harry’s peculiar behavior led his classmates at school to dub him “the robot,” and left many of his teachers to wonder if he really was mentally ill, as Petunia Dursley so often claimed. To the rest of the world, Harry Potter had become a shell, devoid of all life and emotion, and this suited him just fine. After all, if emotions were what the world used to hurt you, then he would simply take away their ammunition.

It was only when he was alone at night, locked safely in his cupboard, that Harry would allow himself to feel. When he was younger, Harry

would often have dreams of being rescued by a long lost relative, someone who had been looking for him for a long time and would finally bring the Dursley's to justice. As years passed and the beatings increased, he came to realize how foolish such dreams were. By the time he turned 9, Harry Potter had accepted that no one would ever come to rescue him, and no one else in the world cared if he lived or died. But although he accepted the reality that he was alone in the world, he refused to allow life to slowly kill him. As he sat in the darkness of his cupboard on his 9th birthday, he swore that one day he would be strong. And he would never be helpless again.

After the mysterious healing incident, Harry spent many nights nursing wounds in his cupboard trying to figure out how it happened. One night, after a particularly vicious lashing, Harry closed his eyes and wished really hard that his back would heal itself. As he was wishing, he started to feel sharp, stinging pains all over his back. After a minute the pain began to fade and Harry promptly passed out from exhaustion. When he awoke, he was amazed to find that his back was completely healed and he felt no pain at all. Although he was already quite adept at blocking pain from his conscious mind, he was nevertheless elated at this newfound ability, and practiced routinely every night thereafter.

Now, nearly two years later, Harry once more lay in his cupboard healing his latest batch of wounds. However, tonight something very rare was happening. In fact, one could count the number of times this particular event had occurred in the last year on one hand. Tonight, Harry Potter was smiling.

FLASHBACK

"Take that freak!" Shouted Dudley as he pushed Harry, then 9 years old, to the ground. Knowing what was coming next, Harry rolled into a protective position and concentrated on a single blade of grass in front of him.

It was an odd way to block pain, Harry thought idly as Dudley's foot made contact with the side of his head. He had first discovered it while recovering from a belt lashing years ago. There had been a small spider in his cupboard spinning a web in the corner, and Harry

had become completely entranced by the intricate pattern as it unfolded. It wasn't until the spider finished that Harry realized he hadn't felt any pain while he had been watching. Later, he discovered it didn't matter what he was looking at or thinking about; if he focused hard enough on anything it was like the rest of the world faded away, and nothing was left but him. He had taken to calling this space "the void," after he had read a fantasy novel his cousin had thrown away. In his mind, however, he thought of the void as his home, and it was one of the only places he truly felt safe.

Of course, this was meaningless to his cousin.

"Huh? You like that? Do you? You like getting beat? Well? Say something, freak!"

"Come on D," another voice chimed in, "this is no fun. Leave the robot alone and let's go get that new kid, he looks like a crybaby."

"Yeah, whatever," Dudley replied with a last kick. "Let's go."

As they walked off, Harry slowly uncoiled himself and stretched his screaming muscles. He started to concentrate on healing his bruises when his concentration was broken.

"Hey kid, you ok?"

Startled, Harry whirled to face the voice and instinctively crouched to a protective position.

"Woa there, just checking to see if you're alright," Harry could now see that the voice belonged to a boy a few years older than him. The boy held out his hand. "I'm Jack, Jack Thomas. I saw that fat kid kicking you while you were on the ground and came over to help. Sorry I couldn't get here any sooner."

"No matter," Harry shrugged.

"What'd you mean, no matter," Jack asked, bewildered. "It had to hurt pretty bad."

Harry shrugged again. "Pain is temporary." He turned to walk off.

"Hey, wait a min--"

"Jack? What're you up to now?" A girl's voice interrupted from behind.

"Just a second Row. Hey, kid, wait a minute." Harry stopped and turned around with his typical blank look.

"Yes?"

"Uh, well," Jack stammered. "Hey, this is my sister, Row." He gestured to the young girl that had come up from behind them.

Harry greeted her in his signature monotone. "Hello, Row."

Row giggled. "Well, aren't you just full of excitement. What's this all about Jack?"

"Well, I saw that Dursley kid kicking our friend here while he was on the ground, but they stopped before I came over."

"That's awful," Row gasped. "Are you ok?"

"Fine, thank you," Harry replied cautiously. Why did she care?

"Hmm," Row looked skeptical. "What about you Jack?" She asked as she turned towards him.

As the two siblings talked to each other in low tones, Harry studied their features. Jack was tall and slender, with short brown hair and brown eyes. He had a rough look to him, and he held himself in a way that made him seem much older. Almost as if he had seen too much to be a kid anymore. Switching his attention to Row, Harry was surprised to find almost no similarities between them. Where Jack's features were rather rugged, Row's were sharp and elegant. She was about Harry's height, with high cheekbones and an especially angular nose complimented regally by shoulder length black hair. Her piercing blue eyes screamed intelligence and cunning, but held such deep sorrow that Harry was instantly drawn to her.

“Excuse me if this is rude,” Harry interrupted, “but you two really look nothing alike.”

“That’s ok,” Row laughed. “Actually I was adopted by Jack’s mum before she passed away. We live with his father now.” Harry noticed a look sorrow on Jack’s face when she mentioned his mum, but it was quickly replaced by sheer hatred when she mentioned his father.

“I’m sorry,” said Harry quietly. “My parents died in a car crash when I was one. I live with my Aunt and Uncle now, and they hate me.”

This last part was stated with such quiet certainty that both Jack and Row looked at him with wide eyes.

“You get it too, don’t you,” Jack asked quizzically.

“Get what?” Asked Harry, confused.

“The belt, the stick, whatever,” answered Jack. “My old man is partial to the belt himself.”

Instantly, the blank look was back on Harry’s face. “They’ve never hit me. And why are you telling me all this?”

Jack nodded knowingly. “Yeah, I used to be like that. Look, I ain’t gonna tell nobody. I can just tell, you know? I can see it in your eyes or something. Anyway, if you every wanna chill or anything, me and Row usually hang out in the alley around the corner from the mini-mart. Sometimes my old man leaves early for the pub and we get in without seeing him. Actually, we’re going there right now, wanna come?”

Harry shrugged. “Whatever.”

Jack smiled. “Follow us then.”

END FLASHBACK

The three of them had become remarkably fast friends after that. Having never known what it felt like to have someone who actually cared about him, Harry quickly developed a fierce sense of loyalty to Jack and his sister. Although he didn't admit the extent of the abuse he suffered at the Dursley's, he did tell them he was mistreated. It was almost cathartic for Harry to finally have someone to share even part of his home life with, and he suspected it served a similar purpose for Jack. It turned out Jack's father blamed Row for getting his wife killed, although neither of them knew why. Whenever he tried to take it out on Row, Jack would start a fight with him and take the brunt of the beating. What really scared them both were the speculative looks they sometimes caught Jack's dad giving her lately. Jack said he didn't know what they were about, but Harry instinctively knew he was lying.

It seemed strange to Jack that Harry appeared so angry when he talked about his and Row's father when it was obvious that Harry got the same treatment. Little did he know Harry was already trying to find a way to improve his new friend's situation, knowing first hand how painful such a life could be.

Originally, Harry was worried that Jack and Row would be afraid of him if they were ever to find out about his special abilities, and therefore chose not to tell them. Of course, that decision didn't last for long.....

FLASHBACK

"You know Harry," drawled Jack, "I think I could take your cousin out for you if you want. At least keep him away from you for a while."

"And have him go running to my uncle?" Harry snorted. "It doesn't really matter anyway, most of the time I'm too fast for him, and if he does get me I don't really feel it and he gets bored."

"Yeah, yeah, big bad Harry," teased Row.

Harry shrugged. "You know it's not like that. It's just that pain is really temporary, you know? I mean, if that's the worst there is then bring it on. I'll take it for now, and when I'm stronger I'll put them in their

place, and everybody like them.” Harry’s eyes hardened and his voice grew hard. “I’ll never be helpless again.”

Jack broke the tense moment by doing a superman pose. “Then you’ll be SUPER HARRY!”

Row broke out in giggles and Harry’s face relaxed. “Yeah, well-,” he began, but was interrupted by a car that came speeding around the corner of the alley.

“Row, LOOK OUT!” Jack yelled, but it was too late. The car was headed straight for her and showed no signs of slowing. Just when it appeared the car would hit her, Harry flung his hand toward and shouted “MOVE!”

And she did.

Row was suddenly flung violently sideways, avoiding the collision by milliseconds. She soared through the air and crashed straight into an astonished Harry, who promptly collapsed on the pavement under the added weight. They both lay there panting, and Harry found himself feeling oddly drained.

“Umm, uh,” Jack stammered in confusion. “Ok, what the hell just happened? It was like you pulled her right into you, Harry. Harry? Hey, HARRY!”

“Huh, what?” Harry broke out his trance.

“I don’t know how you did,” Row turned around, still breathing heavily. “But thanks.”

“Yeah, thanks,” echoed Jack. “But what the hell did you just do? You just pulled her right to you, like it was nothing!”

Looking at their astonished but grateful faces, Harry made a decision.

“Ok, now you guys have to promise not to tell anybody this, but this isn’t the first time something weird has happened around me....”

END FLASHBACK

In the end, they had taken the news much better than he thought they would. Jack had even remarked that now he really could be “Super Harry,” and asked what else he thought he could do. Harry had replied that he really wasn’t sure, but they may as well find out.

And so it was that instead of just hanging out in the alley after school, the young trio spent every afternoon trying to establish the limits of Harry’s odd powers. After a few short weeks, they still appeared limitless. So far they had determined that Harry could move virtually any small object in any direction simply by thinking about it. They had also tested his healing abilities, but thus far it appeared that the only person he was able to heal was himself.

It had been one of Jack’s ideas that finally led them to a breakthrough, when he had jokingly asked Harry if he thought he could throw a fireball like Gandalf from Lord of the Rings. Harry had laughed too, until he tried and it and managed to set Jack’s shoes on fire. Since then, Jack had been re-reading every fantasy novel he could get his hands to find new things for Harry to try. After two months of daily practice, Harry could move objects, make things bigger and smaller, create fire, ice, and water, blow things up (Jack’s favorite) and make himself invisible. And the list was still growing.

After a month of practice, Jack had suggested that Harry use his new powers on his so-called family to teach them a lesson. While it was tempting, using his abilities still left him rather tired, and unless he wanted to kill all three of them it would leave him defenseless later. Therefore, he decided that the best option was to continue to explore his strange gift and grow stronger. If life had taught Harry Potter anything, it was that he would only have one chance to make his escape. If he failed, it would likely be the last thing he ever did.

And he would not fail his friends.

Now, in his cupboard nearly a full 2 years later, Harry was confident that he could take his uncle and cousin apart piece by piece. His powers still seemed limitless, and he could use them for hours on end before he began to feel drained. In fact, it seemed that there was

virtually nothing he couldn't do it he concentrated hard enough. He'd even discovered that if he looked someone directly in the eyes he could almost read their mind, like he was viewing their thoughts on a TV screen. It was a good thing too, because after nearly 11 years of torture, Harry Potter had a plan. He was ready to make his escape.

A/N What'd you think? Good, bad, ugly? The fantasy novel thing I saw originally in a story called Harry Potter, the Archmagus, or something like that. It just seemed to me that kids would naturally go to comic books and fantasy novels to find cool powers they might want to have (I know I would). FYI, this will be a Super Harry story, but I'm not going to make him ridiculously all-powerful with all sorts of strange talents. Basically, the idea is that Harry can do pretty much anything magic is capable of if he concentrates hard enough, and he doesn't need a wand. When he finds out about Hogwarts (which will NOT be immediately – he will miss at least the first year) he will have to reconcile what he knows about magic and what they teach. I guarantee there will be many things he will need to learn. However, he WILL be much stronger than any other student and most adults.

“Daddy, the freak burned my bacon,” whined Dudley as he stuffed his face.

“BOY! I warned you,” said Vernon as he began to grin. “Get over here and take your punishment.”

“Now, now Vernon,” interrupted Petunia. “It’s the last day of school. Plenty of time for that over the summer before we put him to work.”

“Hmm, yes. You’re lucky boy! Got a stay of execution for now.”

“Now hurry up freak!” Shrieked Petunia. “Get Dudley’s things together and out the door.”

“Yes Aunt Petunia,” Harry replied evenly. Still, he couldn’t prevent the shiver of anticipation that ran through him. If everything went according to plan, he would never set foot in this accursed house again. As he passed his cupboard, he couldn’t stop himself from taking one last look. It wasn’t much, but it was his. And despite all he’d been through, he found that he would miss it in some strange way. As he took his last look, he couldn’t help but think that this should always be his, even if he wasn’t there. This was where Harry Potter lived, it belonged to him. He concentrated, and he could feel the soft presence of his powers as he wished that this would always be Harry Potter’s cupboard, and that no one would ever change that. With a final look, he slammed the cupboard door (ignoring his Aunt’s screech), turned and headed out the front door, quietly muttering “good riddance,” as he left.

“Ha, you’re going to get it tonight freak,” taunted Dudley as they walked to the bus stop. “Worse than ever. Dad even said he’ll let me have a few shots, how’d you like that, huh?”

“Of course, that would be lovely Dudley. Perfect.” Harry responded in his usual monotone.

“Whatever, freak,” spat Dudley as the bus pulled up. “You’ll get yours.”

When they arrived at school, Harry made sure that he got off the bus right in front of Dudley. As he going down the last step, he deliberately tripped and fell hard onto the pavement grabbing his ankle.

"You clumsy freak," laughed Dudley. "I didn't even push you this time."

"Whatever," Harry spat, "just tell Mrs. Adams I'm going to see the nurse."

Harry began to hobble toward the main building as Dudley waddled towards their classroom. When he was certain Dudley was out of sight, Harry darted behind a tree to make himself invisible and then ran to the alley.

"Jack, Row, you here?" Harry shouted, making himself visible again.

"Right here, mate," replied Jack anxiously as he stepped out from behind the dumpster. "Everything ready?"

"Ready as it will ever be. Come on, we've got at least a couple hours before Mrs. Adams asks the nurse where I am. We need to be long gone by then, and our bus leaves in 5 minutes."

Row and Jack looked both excited and terrified at the thought of finally escaping. Although Harry had been over his plan many times, Row couldn't help but worry what would happen to all three of them if they got caught running away.

Sensing her fear, Harry soothed her. "Don't worry Row, we can do this. Even if they catch us, I'll fight us out of it. I'm done hiding, from now on I'll use my powers for all three of us, and nobody will ever run our lives again except us. I swear it."

Seeing the look of fierce determination on Harry's face and the assuring smile on Jack's, Row smiled. "Ok Harry, we're with you, let's go."

The plan was simple. After using his mind-reading powers on his aunt, Harry had been able to find out the PIN codes to all three of the Dursley's bank accounts. For the last 4 nights, he had been sneaking out at night with his aunt's bank cards and withdrawing money from her accounts. Add that to the cash that his uncle kept stashed under the seat in his car and Harry had been able to procure almost 10,000 pounds that the three of them would use to get a flat in London. From there, Harry would change their appearances to make them unrecognizable and make Jack appear old enough to be out on his own. Once they were settled, Harry decided he would try to use his powers to help as many people as he could, and hopefully find a way to make some money as well.

The first part of the plan passed smoothly. It wasn't until the trio reached London that they discovered a problem.

"Uh, Jack?"

"What's up Harry?"

"Have you ever been to London before?"

"No. Why, haven't you?"

"Well, not exactly. To be honest, I don't have the first clue where we should go to find a place to live."

Jack looked thoughtful. "Well, my dad always used to complain about Hackney in East London. Said there were real seedy places there, so we should check that out. At least until we have some money coming in."

Harry shrugged. "Hackney it is then, let's go."

After a trip through the underground and a rather long walk, the trio arrived in East London. Despite appearances (it looked like it had been build 40 years ago and forgotten about), Harry had to admit it looked like a good place to start. After some quick searching and a few awkward questions, they settled on a corner motel with a weekly rate of 115 pounds. Harry put the illusions in place and sent Jack in

with enough money to pay for a month. Jack emerged 10 minutes later with a broad smile on his face.

“Well, what are you waiting for,” he asked. “Let’s go see our new home!”

As it turned out, the room was a far cry from “home.” The paint was peeling, the carpet was rotted through, and the bathroom looked like it hadn’t been cleaned in a year. Still, as Harry looked around the room he felt an odd sense of satisfaction fill him.

So this is what freedom feels like, he mused.

“Jack, Row, what do you say we head into downtown and celebrate tonight. We can see the sights and have ourselves a big dinner, just the three of us, and toast our future.”

Row smiled. “Sounds good to me.”

Jack grinned and slapped Harry on the back. “Sounds pretty damn good to me too, mate.”

Thus the three teens found themselves enjoying their first night of freedom walking the streets of London and laughing. As he sat at an outdoor café, Harry glanced at his friends and realized that for the first time Jack and Row actually looked their age. The haunted look and worried creases were slowly fading away in the evening breeze. It was as if they had been reborn, together; a brand new family, full of hope and promise. And Harry would make sure that nothing threatened any of his friends again.

Headmaster’s Office, Hogwarts

While Harry was enjoying his first taste of freedom, Albus Dumbledore was becoming severely annoyed.

He had received all of the Hogwarts acceptance letters that he had expected except one, and the one he was missing worried him.

There had been multiple letters sent out to the boy, and yet Dumbledore knew from the charms on the envelope that none of them had been opened. He knew when he placed Harry Potter with his Aunt that he would be effectively cut off from the wizarding world, but he certainly hadn't expected that he himself would be cut off from Harry as well.

Even more disturbing was the address that had been on the envelopes to be delivered: the cupboard under the stairs. The thought of locking a boy in a cupboard was abominable, and it twisted his insides to think that he was responsible for placing him there if that was the case. He had re-addressed the letter numerous times, hoping it was a mistake, and yet the address was printed the same every time. This was even more concerning, since it meant that the boy was not only in the cupboard, but also never seemed to leave it. Needing to know the truth immediately, Dumbledore had sent Hagrid to investigate and was now anxiously awaiting his return. If something had happened to Harry Potter.....

A chime started Albus out of his musings, announcing that Hagrid had returned and was on his way up the stairs to his office. Shortly thereafter there was a loud knock at the door.

"Come in, Hagrid."

Hagrid lumbered in with a nervous look on his face.

"Professor Dumbledore sir?" Began Hagrid. "I think you need to come have a look at something at the Dursley house."

"What is it, Hagrid," Dumbledore asked, concerned. "Is it Harry? Is something wrong?"

Hagrid looked sheepish. "I don't rightly know, sir. They said he's run away. I said I wanted to look in the cupboard under the stairs, like the letter says. They told me I'm welcome to try, but I couldn't get it open. I know it ain't usual, but I think it's been sealed. By magic."

"Magically sealed?" Dumbledore's eyebrows rose. "I do believe I will have a look myself. Would you care to accompany me?"

"If it's all the same, sir, I'd like to get back to my hut."

"Of course Hagrid, I'll let you know when I return."

A short time later, Dumbledore arrived in the living of Number 4 Privet, much to the distress of Dudley Dursley, who happened to be watching TV at the time.

"M-MU-U-M!" Dudley stammered as he leapt to his feet.

"What is it Diddyki-," Petunia began sweetly, before screeching, "FREAKS! IN THE HOUSE! WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE? GET OUT, NOW, BEFORE I-," her mouth continued moving, but no more sounds were coming out.

"There now," Dumbledore said pleasantly. "I need to ask you about your nephew, Harry Potter. If you can answer my questions we'll leave shortly." He flicked his wand and Petunia could speak again.

"Like I told the other one, he's run away. Almost a month ago now. Just up and left one morning to go to school and never came back. Good riddance, I say."

"A month?" Dumbledore frowned. "Very well. Let's see this cupboard." Petunia blanched.

Dumbledore walked slowly over to the cupboard door and waved his wand, a soft yellow glow formed around the door.

"Most curious. It does appear to be locked magically, although not by any spell I know. Hmm. Well, best to start with the basics, alohamora."

The door seemed to shiver for a moment, but remained closed.

"Ok, perhaps a bit more power," Dumbledore muttered, before stating more forcefully: "alohamora."

This time the door shivered and finally opened, revealing a very dirty and very empty cupboard, its only contents a ragged cot.

“You kept him here!” Dumbledore was appalled. “Certainly this wasn’t his room? It couldn’t be, he was your nephew!”

“He was a FREAK!” Petunia screeched, “just like my sister. Just like the lot of you. He was unnatural and ungodly. He got what he deserved and I’m glad he’s gone!”

Dumbledore seemed to age 100 years in an instant. “What do you mean ‘got what he deserved.’ You let him be hurt? Here, when I put him in your care?”

Petunia Dursley seemed to realize she’d made a mistake, and hurried to correct it. “Of course not, he was always fighting with Dudley, and my Diddykins didn’t like that. Boys will be boys, you know.”

Certain she was lying, Dumbledore began to examine the cupboard more closely. What he found made him want to vomit. The carpet was thick with dark red stains, and on many of the walls written in what was almost certainly blood was the statement: “I am Harry Potter.” Sometimes other things were written beneath the repeating line, things like “I am unbreakable,” or “I will survive.” It was obvious that Harry’s blood had been spilled many times for him to be able to write in it. Seeing this, Albus Dumbledore, the most powerful wizard in the world, slowly sat down on the cot in the cupboard under the stairs, and wept.

2 Weeks Later, London

“Now, ladies and gentleman, watch carefully. You see this pen, it is an ordinary pen taken from this gentleman. You see I have nothing in my sleeves, now watch carefully.”

Slowly, Harry closed his hand around the pen, concentrated on making it invisible and weightless, and then opened them to show it was gone.

“Did you see it? Anybody? How about you sir?” He gestured to a middle aged man in a tailored suit standing in the crowd. “Step up now, there you, did you see it? Where is it now?”

“I don’t know son, where is it?”

While the man was speaking, Harry levitated the pen in the man’s front pocket and cancelled the spells he’d put on it.

Harry smiled. “Well sir, I suggest you check you front pocket.”

The man slowly pulled the pen out from his pocket. “Well, I’ll be damned if I’ve ever seen something like that. And right in front of me too.” The man reached for his wallet. “Well, that’s funny, I was going to give you a fiver for that little trick but I can’t seem to find-“

“Looking for this?” Harry interrupted, holding the man’s wallet. The crowd roared its approval and the man looked baffled.

“Never trust a magician, good sir,” said Harry with a cheeky grin. “We’re devious, the lot of us.” The crowd laughed.

“Harry that was great!” Row squealed once everyone had gone. “And look, we made almost 30 pounds on the performance alone!”

Harry smiled at her excitement. He had been using his powers as a street performer for over a week now, and although he really didn’t like acting like a showman, he had to admit the money was good.

“Yeah, well,” he began, “it puts food on the table. And I have to admit it is kinda fun sometimes. The look on that guy’s face was priceless. Anyway, let’s get back. I want to see how Jack’s first day of work on the docks went”

When they arrived back at their room, Jack was lying on the bed, looking exhausted.

“Tired?” Teased Row.

"You have no idea," Jack replied. "One day and I already feel like an old man."

"Well, we had a great day. You should see him now, he's amazing! Had the whole crowd eating out of his hand."

"Yeah, well," interjected Harry, "let's be honest here. I do kinda have an advantage in the magician business."

"You mean the fact that what you do it actually magic?" Row smirked.

"You know, I've been thinking about that," said Jack seriously. "I wonder if that's something only you can do, like a special power, or can any of us do it?"

"Yeah, maybe you're an alien!" Row squealed. "Maybe I can turn you in to the X-files!"

"Shut up Row, I'm serious."

Row held out her hand. "Hi Serious, I'm Row."

"And I'm getting a headache," Harry groaned.

"Well, that's a strange name," Row giggled. "Can I call you I.G.H? Or ig for short?"

"SHUT UP ROW!" Jack and Harry yelled together.

"Boys are no fun," Row pouted.

"Anyway," Jack interrupted, "I think you should try to teach us to do some of the stuff you can do. You know, some of the easy stuff, like making things float."

"Hmm," Harry mused, "ok, why not? We'll start tonight after dinner."

That night when the trio returned from dinner, Harry sat cross legged on one of the beds and motioned for Jack and Row to do the same.

He took out 2 sheets of plain white paper and placed it on the bed in front of him, then he placed a red ball between them.

“Ok, now what I want you both to do first is try to clear your mind completely. I want you both to focus on the ball. Focus completely, no distractions. I want you focus on the ball until it is the only thing in the room, until everything else seems to fade away. Once you have that, I want you do visualize the ball moving. It doesn't matter what direction, imagine your thoughts stretching out to the ball and pushing it around, lifting it, hitting it. Just visualize your thoughts hitting the ball.”

“What's the paper for?” Questioned Row.

“Well, when I was first experimenting, sometimes I would be trying to move something and something else would move instead,” explained Harry. “Or if it was trying to move something on a shelf, I might accidentally move the whole shelf. The paper is here so that if you get a little bit off, we can still tell its working. Ok, no more talking, try it.”

Both Jack and Row began to stare viciously at the ball.

“Ok, ok, wait a minute,” Harry broke in, “you're not trying to kill it. Just concentrate, peacefully. When you reach the right point, you feel like you're one with everything, it's very peaceful.”

“And very Zen Buddhist.”

“Very funny Row. The point is, don't concentrate on concentrating. Just look at the ball, start looking at the color, how it's lighter or darker in some places. Or how it has spots on it, or how it is sitting on the bed. Anything. But don't be so fierce or you'll never get it.”

They both nodded, and went back to concentrating with Harry watching both the ball and the paper for any sign of movement.

After 30 minutes there had been no movement.

"It's ok, don't give up," encouraged Harry. "Now that I think about it, I think this is a really good idea. In fact, we should try it every night from now on."

For the next 2 weeks, the young trio made the same attempt every night with same results. It was looking quite hopeless until Harry had an idea.

"Ok guys, tonight I want to try something a little bit different. It might be really strange though, so tell me if you think it's too much." They both nodded. "Ok, here's my plan. You know I can kind of read minds right?" They nodded again. "Well, I think maybe I can move your thoughts around too. So I was thinking that I can try to read your minds while you're concentrating and kind of guide you along. That way you'll really be able to see how I do it, and maybe I can get one of you guys to do it too. I promise I won't look at anything else in your head."

"We trust you Harry," Jack said. Row nodded.

"Ok, let's try it then."

Both Jack and Row began concentrating on the ball, and Harry decided to start with Jack. At first he had trouble, since Jack was concentrating his gaze on the ball, but eventually Harry was able to get in and find the familiar movie screen of Jack's thoughts. This time, instead of just watching, Harry started to gently probe inside of Jack's mind, looking for the feeling he associated with his powers. It was a very odd feeling, moving around in somebody else's mind, and Harry quickly found himself disoriented. Eventually he recovered, and found himself looking at... himself?

He was seeing through Jack's eyes! He quickly went through the process he used to access his powers, and then stopped in shock. Just as he was about to levitate the ball, he reached for something and it wasn't there. Suddenly Harry felt horribly empty, and retreated as fast as he could back to his mind breathing heavily. Immediately he focused on himself and was relieved to find all his powers in tact.

“What was it?” Jack asked anxiously. “I could feel you in my head, and you just took over. It was like I was still me but you were in control. Then I felt you panic and just run out. What happened?”

“I’m not really sure,” Harry replied slowly. “But I don’t think everyone can do this. When I was trying to get you to do it, I, well, reached for something. I don’t know what, it was weird. All I know is that once I found out it wasn’t there, I felt completely empty and I had to get out. Now that I’ve felt what it’s like without it, I can feel it all around. It’s like this big thing inside me, and somehow I just know that’s where all my power comes from.”

“It’s inside you?”

“Yes and no. I have like this, this center inside me, but I can also feel it around me. Kinda like the force I guess.”

“And I don’t have it?” Jack asked glumly.

“Sorry mate.” Harry knew Jack wouldn’t like it, but he refused to lie.

“Ah well, what about Row?”

“I don’t know yet, she’s the next to test. Don’t worry, it should be way easier this time.”

He repeated the process with row, and when he retreated he had big smile on his face.

“She’s got it.”

“Really?” Row’s face lit up. “You’re sure?”

“Positive. I could feel the power in you too, although it seemed a lot smaller than in me. But I guess that’s to be expected since I’ve been using it a lot longer. Let’s try it again, and this time I’ll actually use it.”

Once again Row concentrated on the ball and Harry entered her mind. Fifteen seconds later, the ball started to move.

"I did it! I did!" Screeched Row

Harry and Jack smiled. "Congratulations."

"Well then, Mr. Potter," said Row as she sat next to him. "It looks like you just might have a magician assist soon."

"Well then," said Jack as he leaned back on the bed. "You magic types get out there and make me some money!"

He was promptly pelted by every pillow in the room.

A/N Ok, there's chapter 2. Again, any suggestions are most welcome.

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts

"Come in, Minerva. Tea?"

"Please," said McGonagall, taking a seat opposite the headmaster. "All the students that are going have left."

"Ah yes. I trust there were no difficulties?" Inquired Dumbledore as he handed McGonagall a cup.

"No, none. Although I'm not anxious to hear what Miss Granger's parents have to say about her spending almost a month of term in St. Mungo's. It's a miracle she survived at all."

"Very true," mused Dumbledore. "I fear she may be even more withdrawn when she returns, having faced such a fearsome creature at such a young age."

"I'll do everything I can for her," promised McGonagall. "Speaking of which, do we have any idea how in the world a troll was able to enter Hogwarts?"

"Severus believes it was Professor Quirrell," McGonagall snorted. "Yes, I must agree," said Dumbledore with a slight smile. "Still, he has experience in such matters, so we must keep our eyes open."

McGonagall nodded and seemed to pause for a second before asking, "and what of young Mr. Potter?"

Albus sighed heavily. "I'm afraid there has been no progress. I asked Filius to look at the cupboard where the letters are still addressed, and he has come to the same conclusions as I. Somehow, Mr. Potter was able to magically imprint himself on that cupboard before he left the Dursley home. I do not know how he did it; and it has certainly never been done before. A wizard can be hidden of course; unreachable by owl, but to physically be someplace and yet be magically detected somewhere else? It is truly baffling."

"You let Filius see the cupboard?" McGonagall asked, surprised.

"I'm afraid I had to have him agree to a memory charm afterwards. I do not wish it to become common knowledge that Harry was abused by his muggle relations, especially since we have no direct evidence. You are the only person besides myself who knows, and I would prefer to keep it that way. At least until he is found."

McGonagall paused again. "And if he isn't?"

"He must be," Dumbledore replied softly. "He simply must be."

"Harry, Harry watch!"

Harry turned and watched as Row slowly levitated three colored balls and slowly began to juggle them in the air.

"That's great Row!"

She let the balls drop and collapsed into a chair.

"Whew, I still get really tired though. How do you stand it?"

Harry shrugged. "Well, I was using my healing powers for a long time before I tried anything else, so I think I just got used to using my powers a lot earlier than you did. You'll get it though, it just takes more practice."

"Well, I'm hungry, so I'm gonna make a sandwich. You want anything?"

"No, I'm ok, thanks though."

Harry walked to the window and looked out. After nearly 3 months of saving, the trio had finally been able to afford a proper 2 bedroom flat in Harlesden. Jack was still working at the docks, but it had been Harry's performing that really provided for the move.

After a month of doing street performances, Harry and Row had garnered some major attention, and had been asked to do a series of

street fairs all over England. At first they were reluctant, but when they found out how much the job paid, they decided it was well worth it. It had saddened all three of them that Jack wouldn't see them for so long since he had to stay. As they were leaving Row had jokingly said that it was too bad they didn't have a transporter like Star Trek, since then Jack could teleport to see them anytime.

Jack had slapped his forehead and muttered, "Teleport. How could I never have thought of teleporting?" Approximately 2 days later Harry had discovered that he could indeed teleport, although he had to be very careful when doing it, as he had temporarily lost his right foot the first time he tried.

After their tour, Harry and Row became a very popular act, performing in many small clubs on weekends and some coffee houses on weekdays. With the money they made, the three friends were living rather comfortably. Harry had even experienced his first real Christmas ever, and was overjoyed to give and receive gifts with the people that meant the most to him. In fact, life had never looked better for Harry Potter.

And yet, he couldn't help but feel that something was missing. With all the powers he possessed, he'd still done nothing to help the world in general, and he hadn't brought the Dursley's to justice. Was it his destiny to use his amazing gifts as parlor tricks for middle class Londonites? Somehow, he knew that something greater was waiting for him, which was why he continued to practice and explore his powers.

Harry also couldn't get over the feeling that all his good fortune would inevitably come crashing down around him. Having spent almost his entire life viciously crushing all his hopes and dreams, having them suddenly fulfilled left Harry utterly terrified. Sometimes at night he would wake up and for a moment he would be certain that it had all been a dream, and that he was back in the cupboard under the stairs. Other times he would dream that he suddenly lost his powers and his uncle showed up at his door to drag him back.

But of all his nightmares, the ones that scared him the most were when Vernon took not only him, but Jack and Row as well. He knew

he shouldn't fear his relatives any longer, but the thought of someone, anyone, hurting his friends like his uncle had hurt him left Harry feeling physically ill. It was ironic that leaving the Dursley's as he did left Harry feeling both elated and disappointed. He was obviously elated that he had escaped, and yet the fact that he had never faced his uncle left him feeling like a coward. More importantly, how could Harry ever hope to protect his friends if he couldn't even avenge himself? At that moment Harry knew that if he ever wanted to get past his irrational fears, he would have to face his so-called family again. He would have to return to Privet Drive.

Petunia Dursley was having a good day. Yesterday, she had overheard from one of her neighbors that a couple across the street were having serious problems with their eldest son. Supposedly he was heavily into drugs, and had been caught stealing from his mother's purse to support the habit. Petunia loved juicy gossip like this, and threw herself wholeheartedly into damning the entire family for its poor values, all the while conveniently forgetting that she herself had been missing 20 pounds when she checked her purse that very morning.

As she made her way into the kitchen, she heard a light scraping sound coming from the cupboard under the stairs. She shook it off, knowing it was probably just her imagination. Ever since THEY had come around asking about HIM she'd been understandably nervous that her dirty little secret would get out. But it had been nearly a year since he'd run away, and she'd finally begun to believe they'd all gotten lucky and the boy had gotten himself killed.

"Darling, your two strapping men are home, and they're hungry!" Yelled Vernon Dursley as he made walked in the kitchen door.

"Of course, anything for such fine young men," replied Petunia. "Why don't you turn on the telly, dinner will be ready in about 15 minutes. Dudley, go upstairs and change."

Vernon kissed Petunia on the cheek and walked into the living as Dudley headed up the stairs.

“You’ll never believe the day we had at the plant today, Pet. I swear, it was complete chaos, never see-“

“Hello uncle.”

Vernon Dursley stopped dead and ever so slowly turned toward the cupboard under the stairs. Suddenly, he found himself staring into the coldest green eyes he had ever seen. Like pools of ice, hard as steel and sharp as granite, that gaze burned into his soul, and found it wanting. In that instant, Vernon Dursley saw God. And God was pissed.

With a gesture, Harry sent his uncle flying backward through the kitchen door. The door went flying off its hinges and shattered under the obese man. With another wave, both Vernon and Petunia were suspended in mid air, limbs splayed outwards, unable to move.

“We have a score to settle, uncle.”

Harry’s voice was like steel wrapped in velvet, a low hiss that made Petunia wet herself on the spot.

“Daddy, what’s going on? Where’s my dinner? Where i- ACK”

As Dudley appeared in the kitchen, he was assaulted by the wire attached to the toaster, which wound its way around his fat neck and began to squeeze.

“Well, everybody’s here,” Harry began, careful to raise his voice over his cousin’s gurgling. “I suppose you all know why I’m here. I’m here for revenge. I’m here for justice. But most of all, I’m here to end this, once and for all. And there is nothing any of you can do to stop me. You are at my mercy. Completely.....helpless.”

When Harry had finished, Dudley quickly followed his mother’s example.

“Vernon,” Harry turn towards him, “you’re first.”

Harry sat down at the kitchen table and served himself a piece of chicken as two chairs began to float toward the helpless Vernon Dursley.

CRASH!

The first chair shattered over Vernon's chest.

CRASH!

The second caught him in the side.

Unable to scream, all Vernon Dursley could manage was a horrible gurgle as Harry flung him back and forth, smashing into the walls on either side of the kitchen. Finally, he allowed him to fall on the ground at Harry's feet.

Throughout the ordeal, while Dudley was watching the man he idolized thoroughly abused, Petunia was frozen by the look of fierce determination on her nephew's face.

He's not even enjoying this.

"You're right, Petunia," Harry addressed her thoughts. "I am not enjoying this. I am giving you what you deserve, and making sure you can never hurt another innocent again. For you, I will destroy everything inside this house except for my old cupboard, and you're going to watch while both the hideous creatures who call themselves powerful men learn what true power is."

With that, he enlarged several of the broken pieces from the kitchen door, increased their weight and set them to break every single one of his cousin's ribs.

Seeing that his uncle was beginning to stir, Harry cancelled his cousin's beating and led him fall to the floor with the toaster wire still tight around his neck.

Vernon tried to stand, but it was obvious that both his arms and one of his legs was broken. His face was covered in blood and his right eye was nearly swollen shut.

“Well then uncle,” Harry levitated his Vernon so that he was lying horizontally in the air facing the floor. “I don’t think you’ve been punished enough yet. Haven’t quite ‘learned your lesson,’ eh? Isn’t that what you used to say before you did this?”

Harry flicked his wrist and Vernon’s shirt and belt were stripped off, revealing a disgusting mass of rolling fat. With another flick, the belt began to lash his back viciously. Unlike when Vernon would use it, Harry had no arm to get tired, so every lash was just as strong as the first. After the first five lashes, Vernon had passed out.

Harry waited patiently for him to regain consciousness, then started again.

When he was finally satisfied, Vernon look more like a pile of rotting flesh than a human being. He had soiled himself more than once, and one could no longer distinguish what flesh was still connected to his back and what was falling off. Dudley, while not as bloody, was writhing in pain from having his arm and all his ribs broken.

“Well, we’re almost done here. Just a couple more things and I’ll be rid of you forever.” Harry walked slowly up to Vernon. “Look at me,” he hissed.

When their eyes met, Harry entered his mind. Searching through his fragile mental state, Harry burned every second of this encounter into his memories. Every time he thought of Harry, or the cupboard, or anything relating to them, he would remember this in vivid detail. Harry himself would never fully be rid of the demons this man had created, and now Vernon would never be rid of the demon he created in Harry.

That done, Harry added the finishing touch. With a final flourish, he threw Vernon into the cupboard under the stairs, magically sealing it for the next 2 days. With that, he turned towards his Aunt.

"I hope that there is a hell," he began slowly, "so that you and your family can have these punishments visited upon you every day for eternity. Unfortunately, I'm not that lucky. So, instead, I'm going to make sure you remember what happened here every day for the rest of your life, but are unable to speak of it to anyone. You will never forget that you tried to break me, tried to own me, and that I now own you instead. You will never be free of me, but I am now free of you. If I ever have to deal with any of you ever again, I will not be nearly as merciful as I have been tonight. If Vernon is still alive after 2 days, the cupboard door will open and I will let him live. However, knowing what a pathetic wretch he is, I would be surprised if he lasted the night. In any case, this is the last time you will ever so much as look at me if you wish you and your precious Dudley to remain breathing."

As Harry spoke he poked and probed around inside Petunia's mind, burning the images into her as he had done with Vernon. With a final twist, he made sure she would never be able to tell anyone what happened, or who had done it.

With a final flourish of his hands, Harry demolished the inside of Number 4, Privet drive, and then vanished.

Harry arrived in his bedroom and immediately collapsed onto his bed. A part of him was disgusted with what he had done to his uncle; he had delivered the same type of malicious beating that had been given to him so often. However, Harry also knew that all three of the Dursleys truly deserved every single thing he had done to them. There wasn't a doubt in Harry's mind that his uncle would treat Row exactly how he had treated Harry if given a chance, and he would never allow anyone to hurt his friends, no matter the cost. If that meant he had to be the one to stand up to the Vernon Dursleys of the world, then that's what he would do. For Harry Potter, no price was too high if it provided safety for his friends and family.

Later that night, after Petunia and Dudley had gone to the Hospital, Vernon Dursley lay dying in a space hardly big enough to fit someone half his size. As his life slowly slipped away from him, he looked up and saw, written in blood:

I AM HARRY POTTER

I WILL BE THE STRONGEST

YOU WILL NOT BEAT ME

It was the last thing Vernon Dursley ever saw.

A/N Kinda brutal, I know. Still, it was necessary (and they really did deserve it). Next chapter Harry has his first real encounter with another wizard and finds himself at the business end of a wand. As always, suggestions are welcome.

Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, Ministry of Magic

Arthur Weasley looked up from his desk as an official looking owl landed next to him and held out its leg.

“Everything alright sir?” Assistant Perkins asked.

“Yes,” replied Arthur as he read the note. “It seems that we’ve received a report that an entertainer in London may be using enchanted artifacts. I am to accompany auror Dawlish to a performance tonight to determine whether any ministry laws are being broken.”

“Well then, happy hunting!”

London, 4 hours later

“That’s it ladies and gents. Thanks again for coming, and drive safely.”

Harry and Row had just finished another performance at the local night club, and were walking backstage when they were suddenly confronted by two men.

“Ok son, I think you have some explaining to do,” Arthur Weasley stated bluntly. “I can’t say I know who you are, but what in the world are you thinking using magic in front of muggles like that?”

“Uh, don’t take this personally,” Harry replied slowly, “but I haven’t the faintest idea who you are or what you’re talking about. So I’d appreciate if you left us alone now.”

“Now see here!” Exclaimed Dawlish as he pulled his wand. “You can’t be more than a year out of Hogwarts, so I know you understand the laws you’re breaking. It will be better for everyone here if you just cooperate.”

Row cast a withering look at the second man. “Look, I’m sorry if you have us confused with somebody else, but we don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. So if you could just –“

“Bollocks!” Exclaimed Dawlish as he leveled his wand at Row. “Come quietly or we’ll be forced to stun you.”

Harry didn’t understand what was happening, but he knew threat when he heard one. Without a second thought Harry sent two nearby chairs crashing into the unsuspecting auror, knocking him out cold.

“STUPEFY!” Arthur Weasley immediately sent a red jet of light at Harry.

Harry twisted at the last second, leaving the stunner to make contact with his shoulder. The impact sent him flying into the wall, and for a moment Harry thought he was going to pass out. His vision seemed to swim and Harry found himself slowly slipping into unconsciousness.

“HARRY! HELP!”

Row’s voice cut through Harry’s consciousness like a knife. Hearing the panic and helplessness in Row’s plea, Harry fought viciously against the darkness that threatened to overtake him. As the darkness receded, Harry turned just in time to see Row dodge another jet of red light from the red-haired attacker.

Thinking quickly, Harry attempted to throw the attacker against the wall. As the man was lifted off the ground, he turned with an astonished look on his face before waving the stick in his hand and muttering something. Immediately, the man stopped moving and landed on the ground.

He has my same powers! Thought Harry frantically. What am I supposed to do now?

Arthur Weasley, meanwhile, was thoroughly confused by the fact that a young man who couldn’t be a day over 17 had managed to cast a rather powerful banishing charm without a wand.

Unfortunately for Arthur, his surprise caused him to forget that he had failed to subdue the young woman to his right. As he cautiously watched the young man in front of him, Row crept up from behind

and swung one of the broken chairs at Arthur's skull with all her strength, knocking him out.

"Is he dead?" Row asked in a trembling voice.

Harry put his finger to Arthur's neck. "No, he's alive. Just knocked out. Come on, let's get out of here." Harry grabbed Row's hand and teleported them both back to their flat.

When they returned, Harry explained what had happened to Jack while Row began to pace.

"What the hell was that?" Row asked once she had settled down. "He had a stick and kept saying 'stupefy,' then a red beam would shoot from the stick right at me."

"Obviously I don't know exactly what happened," Harry said as he turned to face her. "But I think he has the same powers that we do. I tried to pick him up so we could ask him some questions, but he saw it coming and somehow stopped it. Then he hit me with that red beam and I almost passed out. I think it's safe to say that we're not the only ones that have these powers, Row."

"If you think about it, it makes sense," supplied Jack, "out of the three of us, the two of you both have this power, so we really should have expected to find someone else like you eventually."

"Well," Row responded thoughtfully, "I really don't fancy coming up against another guy like that. I think we'd better find a way for us to shield ourselves from another attack."

"Yeah," Harry replied, "but the stuff he was doing wasn't quite the same as what I can do. First of all, he was using a stick, almost like it was a magic wand. Every time he used his powers, he waved the stick and said something out loud."

"That sounds like what the wizards did in the Dragonlance series," exclaimed Jack. "Except I think they used staffs, not wands."

“Well, whatever it was, we need to find a way to counter it.” Interrupted Row. “Those guys were obviously after us, showing up like that did. If they find us again, we need to be ready.”

Harry had been thinking the same thing.

“Don’t worry Row, I won’t let anybody hurt you,” Harry said soothingly. Then his voice hardened. “I’ll get better, and next time, I’ll be ready. I swear it.”

As spring slowly gave way to summer, Harry practiced almost exclusively on shielding himself from an attacker with his same powers. The first step had been to re-create the red “stupefy” beam that the red haired man had attacked with. When the beam had hit Harry he had felt woozy and almost lost consciousness, therefore the trio decided that it was almost certainly a knock out ray of some kind. After a significant amount of trial and error, Harry was finally able to cast a bright red beam that could knock Jack out for about 20 minutes. With that step completed, he and Jack moved on to finding ways to block it.

“Ok, now cast it against the wall and try to make it go through.”

A bright red beam shot from Harry’s hand and hit the nearest wall, leaving the wall completely unblemished.

“Ok, I think that’s good,” said Jack, thinking aloud. “This spell is used to knock people out right?” Harry nodded. “So you wouldn’t want it to do any real damage. That means that any solid object should be able to block it, and if you hit somebody with it, the only thing that will happen is that they wake up with a headache.”

“You know what’s funny?” Asked Harry as he examined his hand. “This spell feels different, like I can feel the energy building up before I release it. Hang on, I want to try something.”

Harry levitated a chair from the dining room and placed it on the floor. He concentrated on shooting a similar beam, but with a different goal.

He flicked his hand outwards and another, darker, red beam shot out and hit the chair. As soon as the beam made contact, the chair shattered into a hundred pieces.

“HOLY SHIT!” Exclaimed Jack. “That was awesome! What did you do different?”

“I think this is a totally different way of using my powers,” Harry answered slowly. “It’s more focused, if that makes any sense. Whereas with most things I just kind of send the power out and then manipulate it, when I do this it’s like concentrating everything I want to happen in that one beam and then sending it out. It let’s me use more power since it’s so concentrated, but I don’t have as much control as I do when I’m levitating and throwing things. I don’t know if that makes sense, but that’s the best I can explain it.”

“Can you do both at the same time?” Asked Jack.

“I’m not sure,” Harry replied. “Let’s find out.”

The rest of the practice session continued with Harry attempting to use ordinary objects as shields while attacking with the stunning ray, as they had taken to calling it. To simulate attacking stunners, Jack was throwing tennis balls at Harry, who would enlarge chairs or cushions to block them.

When the session had ended, Jack sat down across from Harry with a serious look on his face.

“I need to ask you about something.”

“Ok,” Harry looked at Jack questioningly, “what’s up?”

“Well, it’s like this,” Jack said as he ran a hand through his hair. “I’m worried about you. You’ve always been really closed off, especially when I first met you. Never smiling, never laughing, and I know that it was for a good reason. Hell,” he snorted, “I didn’t laugh much either back then. But now we’re free!” He waved his hand around the room. “We can do anything we want, have as much fun as we want, and never look back. Row and I have had more fun in the last year that

the rest of our lives combined, and I can see it in her face." Jack leaned forward and looked at Harry intently. "But not you. You still don't really laugh, and even when you smile it almost never reaches your eyes. In fact, I think the last time I saw you look truly happy was on Christmas. All you ever seem to do anymore is practice using your powers. Look Harry, you're my best friend. And if anyone deserves to be happy, it's you."

Seeing that his friend truly meant what he said touched Harry.

"Thanks Jack, that means a lot. And it's not that I'm not happy, I'm happier than I've ever been." Harry shrugged. "I don't know what to tell you. I practice using my powers because I think it's important. I mean, what if we run into some more of those guys? What if there's more of them this time, or if they're stronger? What then?"

"It's not your job to protect everybody, Harry." Jack said quietly.

"Then whose job is it?" Replied Harry in the same tone. "I have a gift Jack; a power that most people only dream of. What do I have it for if not to protect others? It might not be my job, but that doesn't make me want to do it any less. Life is cruel, Jack, we both know that. How many other people are out there right now in the same situation we were in? Innocent people being hurt and abused, living every day in misery with no hope of ever getting out? I know they don't expect me to help them, but that just makes me want to do it more. I have power, Jack. Real power, enough to make a difference. Tell me, what else can I do?"

Jack and Harry studied each other for a long moment. Finally, Jack broke the silence.

"I don't know man," he said finally. "I just know that you're always pushing yourself, always looking ahead. I know how important it is to you, but you still have to live in the moment every now and then. You're a hero, Harry." Jack put up a hand to forestall Harry's objection. "Wait, hear me out. Everything you do is based on protecting people that are weaker than you, and I get that. Hell, I used to be that. Before you got us out of Little Whinging, everything I did was aimed at making it easier for Row. Now I don't have to do

that because you do it for us, and I don't think I can ever repay you for that. All I can do is make you realize that heroes can have fun too."

Harry gave Jack a small grin. "Sounds like a pretty good job for you, huh?"

"Damn straight," Jack smirked. "Now get dressed, there's fun to be had tonight, and we're just the blokes to have it."

The next month passed slowly but without incident. After their encounter with the other magic attackers, Harry and Row had decided to take a break from their normal performance schedule. Harry had also changed the illusions on himself and Row, on the off chance that there were other people out there looking for them. At night, Jack and Harry would continue their combat practice, and Row would concentrate on using her powers as Harry instructed, most often juggling balls and moving objects. Harry quickly discovered two things about Row: she was an exceptionally quick learner and she asked way too many questions. Because so much of what Harry could do was basically instinct, he found it very hard to put into words, often resorting to his standby: "you just do it." This annoyed Row to no end.

Jack and Harry had also decided it would be best if they learned some martial arts, so they had enrolled in lessons together at a local dojo. Their sensei, master Choi, had been immediately impressed with Harry's ability to focus inward and react on instinct, and Harry had found himself quite enjoying his instruction. Jack, who always ended the lesson considerably worse for wear, held a somewhat different opinion.

Still, between training to use his powers and practicing martial arts, Harry was confident that the next time he was engaged in combat he would emerge the victor. As the full weight of August heat descended upon their flat, the young trio had admit that life was good.

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts

Albus Dumbledore was sitting behind his desk examining the role of potential first years when a chime in his office alerted him of a visitor.

"Come in, Severus."

Severus Snape entered the headmaster's office with his usual scowl.

"You summoned me, Headmaster?"

"Indeed I did, Severus," replied Dumbledore, eyes twinkling merrily. "I have a bit of a surprise for you, although shock may be a more appropriate word." Dumbledore reached into a drawer and withdrew a letter addressed in familiar green ink. "I came across this while looking over the names of potential new students. I think you will find the name most interesting."

Snape took the offered letter and stared in shock at its addressee:

Rowena Selena T'Albieran Snape Thomas

He looked up at the headmaster, dumfounded.

"What does this mean, headmaster? How could Selena have given birth to a daughter than I didn't know about?"

"I do not believe she did, Severus," replied the headmaster. "I believe that your sister adopted the young woman, and in doing so magically granted her your family name, despite all her efforts to leave it behind. Muggle records have her recorded only as Rowena Selena Thomas, since she was adopted after your sister's marriage." Dumbledore was smiling now. "I believe you also recognize the significance of the name T'Albieran?"

"Of course," Snape replied bitterly, "she was obsessed with it. I can only surmise she found who she believed to be its last remaining member, and therefore the last of Rowena Ravenclaw's bloodline."

"You do not believe that is the truth?" Dumbledore's twinkle dimmed slightly.

"I believe that Selena would do anything she could to prove that her childish claims were true," Snape replied. "We argued frequently over what was fact and why was just myth. Of course, when I got to Hogwarts we stopped talking altogether. She never forgave me for being a Slytherin, or for trying to keep her away from that filthy muggle. When I became a Death Eater, she told me she was ashamed to be my sister, and that she never wanted to see me again." His scowl was replaced with a look of sorrow. "She was killed a few short years later trying to protect some muggles during a Death Eater training raid. I hadn't even known they'd been married." He paused, then softly added, "I will never forgive her for that."

"And what of your niece?"

"I will go to her myself." Snape snatched the letter from the desk and made to leave. "She would have been very young when Selena was killed; it is possible she knows nothing of me or her blood family. I would prefer to keep it that way, if possible."

Dumbledore regarded the potions master sadly.

"I shall respect your wishes of course," he replied. "However, my advice would be to get to know the young woman. She is your family, Severus. Whether you admit it or not."

"She is the adopted child of a woman who hated me," Snape replied, regaining his scowl. "The fact that the woman was my sister does nothing to change that. I will meet her, beyond that I promise nothing." With that, he gave a curt nod and strode quickly from the office.

Snape walked quickly to the edge of Hogwarts and disappeared, arriving outside a rather run down building. He double checked the address and the letter and repressed a shudder at the thought of his niece living in such a place.

She is not a Snape. He reminded himself forcefully. You have no family; nothing will change that.

Still, he could not help but be anxious to meet his adopted niece. Although there had been no love lost between his sister and him, he was old enough now to admit that she had been right about many things. Joining the Death Eaters had been the biggest mistake of his life, but it had taken until well after her death for him to properly realize it.

He approached the correct door and knocked forcefully. After several moments the door opened a crack and he could just barely make out blue eyes and blond hair before a boy's voice spoke.

"What do you want?"

"My name is Professor Severus Snape, and I am here to see a Miss Rowena Thomas," he replied in a haughty tone.

"Professor?" The voice asked cautiously. He nodded.

"Ok, hang on a minute." With that he closed the door.

Inside, Row was thinking frantically. What possible reason could a professor have to see me? She wondered.

"I don't like it," Harry said immediately. "What's a professor doing here?"

"Well, Row always did get really good grades," supplied Jack helpfully. "Maybe he found us somehow. In any case, it's just one guy and he might have a good reason. I say we hear him out."

Harry still looked skeptical, but agreed nonetheless. He cancelled the illusion spell on Row but left his and Jack's firmly in place.

Outside, Severus Snape was becoming very annoyed at being kept waiting and was about to simply *alohamora* the door when it opened to reveal a young woman that he instinctively knew to be his niece.

"I'm Rowena, but call me Row. These are my brothers Jack and Harry." The two boys nodded at him, but one seemed to be examining him very closely.

"A pleasure, I'm sure. Miss Thomas, I have been asked to deliver this letter to you. It's an acceptance letter from the very prestigious Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. This may seem hard to accept, but you Miss Thomas, are a witch."

Row looked at the letter with wide eyes and then looked questioningly at Harry, who shook his head slightly.

"Well, I can accept that I guess. After all, every now and then weird things happen around me. But why didn't anybody tell me sooner?"

Snape was slightly miffed at her easy acceptance, but answered her question nonetheless

"Your adopted parents were not magical, they were what wizards refer to as 'muggles' which means that they were unable to do magic. However, it appears that your biological parents were wizards, and hence where you get your magic." Snape glanced around. "Speaking of which, where are your parents? I had expected to have this conversation with them."

"Dead sir," Jack answered immediately. "Mum died when Row was 2 and our dad died just last year. The three of us have been living together ever since."

"Indeed," Snape arched an eyebrow. "And just how do you support yourselves?"

"Can you demonstrate some magic for us, sir?" Harry attempted to change the subject. "Not that I don't believe you, but you must admit it all seems a little far-fetched."

Snape scowled at the obvious misdirection, but complied by turning his chair into clock, then into a pig before returning it to its original form.

"That was really cool Mr. Snape!" Squealed Row. "But what was that stick you were using? Was it magic too?"

"This is not a stick, Miss Thomas," reprimanded Snape. "This is my wand, and it is an essential part of doing magic for any witch or wizard, as nearly all major types of magic are impossible to perform without one."

The three youths exchanged startled glances at that. Row recovered first.

"When do I get one?" She asked.

"If you accept admission to Hogwarts, you will be sent directions to Diagon Alley in London," Snape replied. "Diagon Alley is the wizarding shopping district. There you will procure all necessary items as detailed in your school letter."

"What other types of things can I do?" Row asked eagerly. "Will I be like Merlin or Gandalf? Can I fly? Can we-"

"I assure you, Miss Thomas, that all your questions will be answered should you choose to attend Hogwarts." Interrupted Snape. "Now, as I am a very busy man I shall leave you, unless you have any other relevant questions?"

"How are we supposed to pay for this?" Harry asked.

Again Snape scowled. "It is quite possible that Miss Thomas has a wizarding bank account in her name already, as her parents were wizards. If not, you may apply for a Hogwarts scholarship or you may pay the tuition using muggle money. I believe it comes out to approximately 10,000 pounds yearly. If that is all, I will bid you a good day."

"Of course Professor," Harry replied smoothly. "Thank you for coming, it has been most enlightening."

Snape gave the young boy an odd look before turning towards Row.

"Miss Thomas, I do not mean to pry but I was wondering if you knew your adopted mother's maiden name. It may make it easier for you to find out about your birth parents if you decide to attend Hogwarts."

Row looked questioningly at Jack, who looked thoughtful.

"Well, my old man introduced her as Miss White once, so I guess that's your answer. She got real mad when he did it though."

"Indeed," Snape looked oddly relieved at that answer. "Well, then, if there is nothing further?" They all shook their head and Snape disappeared on the spot.

When he was certain the man was gone, Harry turned to his friends.

"Well, that certainly explains a lot."

A/N Ok, Things are starting to get interesting. In case anybody's wondering, Row is obviously a year younger than Harry, which is why she got her letter this year. Owls still can't track Harry because his address still comes up as "The cupboard under the stairs," so Row will attend Hogwarts before Harry does. Next chapter we have the first trip to Diagon Alley and the first appearance by some of our more familiar HP characters. Thanks for reading and stay tuned.

“Well, that certainly explains a lot.”

Row was nodding slowly, but Jack look utterly confused.

“Wait a minute, if Row is a witch, then you’re a wizard right?” Harry shrugged. “How come you didn’t get a letter?”

“I was wondering the same thing. Row, what does that letter say?”

“Nothing about me, actually.” Row replied. “It just says I’ve been accepted, term starts September first, and gives me a list of things that I need. It’s a big list too.”

“So, let me get this straight,” Jack broke in. “There are enough wizards and witches that they have their own school and their own shopping district, they can do all the stuff you can do, and nobody knows about it? What the hell!”

“I’m still not sure I’m a wizard, exactly,” supplied Harry. “He said wizards need a wand to do their magic, and I certainly don’t. Maybe I wasn’t supposed to get a letter because I’m something else?”

“But I can do stuff without a wand to,” Row protested. “And we know I’m a witch, so I’m guessing that we just discovered a way to do things differently. At the very least you have to be something like a wizard since you’ve been teaching me. Regardless, the real question is, should I go?”

All three paused to think about that until Harry finally broke the silence.

“To be honest, I’m not thrilled with the idea. We don’t know anything about them except that two of them definitely attacked us after that show. Remember Row? One said something about Hogwarts and I distinctly remember the other using the word muggle. They both had wands too.”

Row snapped her fingers. “That’s right, the first one said ‘you can’t be more than a year out of Hogwarts, so I know you understand what

laws you're breaking.' There must be laws against using magic around normal people!"

Harry was impressed that she had remembered that, and had to agree that her reasoning made sense.

"So now they have a government and laws!" Jack exclaimed. "This is better than a fairy tale. Next thing we'll find out they ride dragons and unicorns for transportation!"

"I hate to burst your bubble," smirked Row, "but it says here that I take a train."

Jack seemed to deflate a little. "Well, maybe it's a flying train or something. It's gotta at least be magic right?"

"This is irrelevant," interrupted Harry. "It sounds you want to go, right Row?" She nodded. "Then we need to seriously think about this. It's possible that my parents were part of this world as well, which would explain why my relatives always called me a freak of nature. It might also explain why your dad blamed you for your mum's death." Jack and Row looked wide-eyed at that. "I'll admit that it seems like a perfect chance to learn more about our powers, but..."

"I think she should go," Jack blurted out. "I think it's time to get Row back in school anyway," Row scowled at that. "And what better place than a magical school? The timing couldn't be better."

"I agree it's a good opportunity, but let's remember that we're all just kids in their eyes," countered Harry. "We get by here because of the illusions I used on you to make you look old enough to be taking care of us. What if that doesn't work on magical people? We're all underage here, Jack, what if they start asking questions and find out your dad is still alive?"

Seeing Jack's face pale Harry quickly added, "Obviously I'm never going to let them do that to you, but I am concerned that we may be getting in over our heads. We know absolutely nothing about this world and what they can do. I just don't want anything to happen to you guys."

Row smiled and wrapped her small arms around him.

“I know you worry, Harry, you always have. The only reason we’re safe and happy today is because of you, so if you don’t want me to go, I won’t.”

Harry let out a long sigh and ran his hand through his messy hair. He looked down to see Row gazing up at him hopefully.

“Ok,” he finally relented, causing Row to squeal and hug him tighter. “But I want to know everything we can about this new world before you leave. You have to phone regularly and if anything happens you let me know immediately. Deal?”

Row was too excited to speak, so she just nodded repeatedly as Harry planned their next move.

“Ok, now that Professor mentioned that your family might have left you money at some sort of wizard bank right? So the same could be true for me. I’d also like to get as many wizard books as I can so we can find out exactly what it is they can do, and if it’s any different from what I can do. We should also try to find as many history books as we can.” Both Jack and Row were nodding along as Harry spoke. “So, how do you accept their offer?”

Row checked the parchment. “It says to ‘owl’ them, I wonder what the hell that means...” When she had finished speaking, she was startled to hear a soft tapping at the closest window. As she opened it, a large barn owl flew through the window and landed on her shoulder with its leg extended.

“I guess it means to give your letter to the owl,” Jack said skeptically. The owl hooted in response.

Quickly grabbing a pen, Row scribbled out an acceptance and asked for directions to Di-Agon Alley (she guessed at the spelling) and attached it to the owl’s leg. The owl gave a hoot and promptly flew out the window.

“Well,” said Row as she sat down, “I guess now all we can do is wait.”

As it turned out, they didn't have to wait long. Less than an hour later another owl appeared with a message for Row containing the requested directions. All three of them were amazed that an entire wizard district was somehow hidden in central London, and they agreed to leave early the next morning to explore it.

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts

Severus Snape strode angrily up the stairs behind the stone gargoyle and burst through the door to the Headmaster's office without so much as a knock.

“What is the meaning of this,” he spat angrily. Dumbledore looked up from his desk, surprised.

“Why did you not tell me that her father had died?” Snape continued. “Or that she had two brothers, my nephews! Why was I not told?”

“Severus, calm yourself,” Dumbledore replied serenely. “I assure I was not aware of the girl's existence until her name appeared on the letter. I was similarly not aware that Mr. Thomas had died, or that Selena had any other children.”

Snape seemed to deflate at that. “I apologize, headmaster, I wasn't thinking clearly.”

Dumbledore waved off the apology. “Don't trouble yourself, my boy. Now tell me, you met her brothers?” Snape nodded. “Did they appear older or younger than her?”

“One was certainly older, I'd say close to 20.” Snape looked thoughtful. “The other was hard to place, but I would say 2 or 3 years older as well.” He recoiled suddenly, wide-eyed. “They must be squibs, otherwise-”

“Otherwise they would have also received letters,” Dumbledore finished for him. “That is the logical assumption. Of course, they may also be your blood family-“

“Squibs!” Snape hissed incredulously. “Headmaster, your opinions on this subject are well known, as it the fact that I will never agree with them. Squibs are an abomination, and nothing you say will convince me otherwise. Even if they are Selena’s children, they are not my family.” Dumbledore looked down sadly. “This merely makes my task easier. Also, I hardly think it fitting that a girl her age should be living without an adult guardian. If she truly is the last T’Albieran, there are many proper families that would be happy to take her in.”

“A topic for another time, I believe,” said Dumbledore sadly. “I will check with Muggle Affairs regarding Miss Thomas’s family situation.” Snape nodded strode out of the office as Dumbledore added softly, “and for your own sake, I truly hope that you change your mind.”

The next day dawned bright and clear, or at least it would have if Harry hadn’t been awoken by Row at an ungodly hour. As he looked groggily at his alarm clock, Harry couldn’t help thinking that she was far too excited to be going to school. After a quick breakfast, the three friends set out for Diagon Alley together with Row giving directions. As they approached the address contained in the letter Row had received Jack began to look skeptical.

“Where the hell is this place?” He asked. “All I see is a bunch of closed up stores.”

“Ah, I see it,” Row said, pointing. “See, The Leaky Cauldron, just like the letter said.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Asked an agitated Jack. “I don’t see a-” He paused as his eyes focused on the pub. “Ok, where the hell did that come from?”

“Who cares?” Interjected Harry. “Let’s go.”

Jack grumbled but complied, and a short time later they stood in the entry of a small, dark pub. Walking quickly, Row led toward the back until they were in front of a brick wall.

"Trying to get into the alley?" Asked a voice from beside them.

"Yes, actually," answered Harry. "My sister here is a new Hogwarts student."

"Ah, of course," the man replied as he drew out a wand and tapped an odd pattern on the wall. "Well, best of luck." With a final tap, the wall began to shift and change to reveal Diagon Alley, making three jaws drop simultaneously, until someone remarked:

"Well, I think it's safe to say we're not in Kansas anymore."

It was a sign of their shock that they couldn't tell which one of them had said it.

"Excuse me," a voice startled them out of their daze, and Harry realized that they were still blocking the entrance.

"Pardon us," he said as he turned to see a bushy haired girl and her parents. "It's our first time here."

"Really? Are you going to Hogwarts too?" Asked the girl's father.

"I am!" Row piped up, smiling. "These are my brothers, they're just my escort" she said with a wink.

"We're muggles," supplied Jack helpfully. The man laughed.

"Glad to see we're not the only ones here, then," he said. "I'm Dan, this is my wife Emma and my daughter Hermione."

"I'm Jack, this is my brother and Harry and sister Row." They all shook hands.

“Uh,” Hermione began hesitantly, “would you maybe like to come around with us? You don’t have to, of course, but-”

“Sounds perfect,” interrupted Row. “We have no idea where we’re supposed to get all this stuff,” she gestured to her letter. “Although we definitely have to go to the bank first.”

“Ok, do you want to meet us at the Bookstore?” Asked Hermione, pointing. “It’s called Flourish and Blott’s, right over there.”

Row looked at Harry, who smiled.

“Sounds perfect.”

As they parted Jack grumbled, “Just our luck, the first witch we meet and it’s another bookworm.”

“Jack, just because you can only understand picture books doesn’t means books are bad,” laughed Row as she quickened her pace down the street.

“Oy! That was one book!” Jack exclaimed, hurrying to catch up.

Neither noticed Harry smile softly to himself as he subtly surveyed the street as they walked, looking for any sign of trouble.

A short walk later, the gang found themselves in front of a gleaming white building they had been told was the bank. With Harry in the lead, they made their way inside.

The first thing Harry noticed about Gringotts bank was that it was decorated very oddly. The second thing he noticed was exactly why it was decorated oddly.

“Uh, Harry?” Jack asked nervously, pointing at a small, green figure. “What is that thing?”

“I don’t know,” Harry replied quietly. “But they’re at all the counters, so I assume they work here.” He shrugged before starting forward. “One way to find out I guess.”

Harry approached the counter and waited patiently for the goblin to acknowledge him.

“Business?”

Harry blinked. “Uh, well, I’m new here sir, and I was hoping you could help me out.”

The goblins eyebrows rose at being called sir, but his tone remained curt and professional.

“And just what is it you need help with?”

“My friend and I are orphans, sir,” Harry explained, “but we were told that our families may have had accounts here, and we were wondering how we could find out whether that was the case.”

“Orphans, you say?” Inquired the goblin, Harry nodded. “You don’t have your key then?”

“No sir.”

“Very well,” the goblin scribbled on a form and stamped it. “Griphook! Take these three to see Sharptooth, new key request.”

A new goblin bowed to Harry and motioned for them to follow. As they were walking, Harry decided to ask the question on everybody’s mind.

“Excuse me, uh, Griphook was it?” Harry asked politely.

“Yes, sir?”

“I don’t mean to be rude, but my friends and I are new to the magical world and I don’t exactly know what kind of uh, person or, well, creature you are.”

Griphook gave him a strange look before replying curtly, “I am a goblin, not a person, young sir.”

Harry was about to ask why he didn't consider himself a person, but let the matter drop when they entered a new office with another goblin sitting behind a large desk.

"New key request, master Sharptooth," said Griphook, handing a form to the goblin behind the desk.

"Very good, Griphook." Griphook bowed and left the room.

"Names?" The goblin, Sharptooth, barked at the trio.

"Harry Potter and Rowena Thomas, sir," responded Harry.

Sharptooth's head snapped up quickly and Harry noticed that the goblin's gaze flicked upwards to his forehead for a moment before looking at him with a doubtful expression.

Almost like he was looking for my scar, thought Harry. Weird.

"Very well, we'll need a little of your blood dropped into one of these glasses." Sharptooth produced two ornate crystal goblets from behind his desk along with two slender knives, each about 5 inches in length.

Harry hesitated. "Blood, sir?"

"Yes, blood," snapped Sharptooth impatiently. "If either of you are authorized as key holders for a family vault we will know shortly. If you please." He gestured to the knives on his desk.

Nodding slowly, Harry took the first knife and pricked his index finger over the goblet, letting a few drops of blood fall. When he had finished, Sharptooth snatched the goblet and walked across the room to a small box inlaid with gold and decorated with strange symbols. Holding his hand over the box, Sharptooth muttered something and a small hole appeared in the top with a slight click. The goblin carefully placed the goblet into the box, then waved his hand and muttered again. When Sharptooth finally placed his hand into the box, there was a bright flash and his hand emerged holding a key.

For a second the goblin seemed shocked, and once again Harry found himself being scrutinized. Finally, Sharptooth made his way back to the group.

“Sorry for the delay, Mr. Potter,” he said slowly, handing the key to Harry. “Vault 687, give me a moment to attend to your friend and I will have Griphook show you down.”

The process was repeated with Row, but this time when Sharptooth put his hand into the box, it emerged empty.

“I’m sorry, Miss Thomas, but it appears that there are no family vaults that you are authorized for, at least not by blood inheritance. Would you happen to know the family name?”

“No,” Row sniffed, “I didn’t even know I was a witch until yesterday. I’ve always just been regular ‘ol Row Thomas.”

Sharptooth gave the goblin equivalent of a shrug. “Well, if that concludes your business, Griphook will show you to your vault Mr. Potter.”

Harry bowed formally. “Thank you for your assistance, master Sharptooth.”

Sharptooth returned the bow. “My pleasure, Mr. Potter.”

The group turned and followed Griphook out of the office and toward a loading platform.

“This looks like a roller coaster,” muttered Jack as they strapped themselves into the cart.

Griphook gave him a toothless grin before throwing a switch and sending the cart barreling through the vast underground tunnels of Gringotts. After a short trip that left all three children excited and breathless, the cart stopped outside a large set of doors.

“Vault 687,” recited Griphook. “Key please.”

Harry handed Griphook the key and watched as he inserted it into the large doors, swinging them open to reveal pile upon pile of gold coins.

"Is this all yours?" Jack asked in awe.

"Ours," Harry corrected him. "This is all ours."

Jack gave a low whistle. "I wonder how much is here?"

Harry turned to Griphook. "Is there a way for me to find out approximately how much I have in here?"

"Of course, Mr. Potter," Griphook replied. He walked over to the nearest wall and ran his hand over it, revealing a ledger. "As of today, you have 103, 640 galleons and change. At the current exchange rate of 4.2 pounds per galleon, that is approximately 435, 288 pounds."

Griphook's statement was met with three looks of pure astonishment.

"F-Four hundred thousand pounds?" Stammered Jack. "FOUR HUNDRED THOUSAND POUNDS! WOOHOO!" He jammed a fist in the air. "WE'RE RICH!"

Row was looking between Harry and Griphook with wide eyes after this announcement. Harry, however, looked lost in thought.

"Is this my family money Griphook?" He asked the goblin, who nodded. "Do you happen to have any records of then, a will maybe? Also, can you tell me if I have any other magical family that can enter this vault?"

Griphook seemed startled by the question, but answered in an even tone. "I'm sorry, Mr. Potter, but we goblins have sworn not to involve ourselves in wizarding affairs more than is absolutely necessary. I can tell you that this vault is yours by blood, passed to you by at least one of your parents. However, beyond these facts I'm afraid there's nothing I can tell you."

Harry sighed dejectedly and nodded. "Well, I guess we'd better take some money and get this shopping done. We'll need something to carry the money in, and I'd also like to withdraw the equivalent of 50,000 pounds, will that be a problem?"

"Not at all," replied Griphook. "I have three bottomless moneybags here, and we can attend to the muggle currency upstairs."

Half an hour later, their business concluded, the trio left Gringotts (after another enjoyable cart ride) and made their way across the street to Flourish and Blott's. Harry entered the store first, and froze for a moment, before grabbing his friends and pulling them into the corner.

"Harry, what the-" Jack began.

"Quiet!" Hissed Harry as he pointed at a group of people in the store. "Row, look!"

Row followed his gaze and gasped. There, standing in the middle of the store talking to a tall, blonde man was their red haired attacker!

"Will somebody tell me what's going on here?" Whispered Jack.

"That's one of the men who attacked us that night," supplied Row. "The one with the red hair, not the blonde one. Actually, they don't seem to like each other."

As they watched, the conversation between the two men grew more and more heated. Although they were too far away to overhear what was being said, it was obviously not pleasant. Finally, the blonde man made a final comment as he turned and walked away, followed closely by a boy about Harry's age.

"That has to be his son," whispered Jack, "they look identical."

"Look, the redheaded guy has kids with him too," said Harry, pointing to a boy and a girl with the same red hair as the man. "I wonder if they all go to Hogwarts?"

“Well, they almost have to, don’t they,” reasoned Row. “Unless there’s another magical school in England that we don’t know about. Plus I’m going to Hogwarts and they sent me to shop here, so it makes sense that we’ll see other Hogwarts students, like the girl from the pub.”

“Ok then, we should be ok. I changed our illusions after that fight, so he shouldn’t recognize us,” Harry reasoned. “If he does recognize us somehow, I want you two to run back out through the pub and onto the street. I’ll hold him off here and then teleport out to the street, understood?” Seeing the serious look on Harry’s face, the siblings nodded quickly. “Ok then, I’m going to start looking for books to take home. Jack, you take Row around to get her schoolbooks and anything else she wants. You might also want to find that girl we met earlier, I’m sure she could help you out.” With that, they split up to begin their tasks.

Harry spent the next 40 minutes scanning the shelves and picking up any book that looked interesting. So far he had chosen The Standard Book of Spells, grades 1-7, Hogwarts, A History, Modern Magical Culture, A Brief History of Magic, A Beginner’s Guide to Transfiguration, 1001 Household Charms, Defensive Magical Theory, Wizarding Combat: An Introduction, The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts, Defending the Un-Defendable: A Comprehensive Guide to Defense Against the Dark Arts, A Beginner’s Guide to Enchantment, and several smaller titles. It wasn’t until he was finished that Harry realized he had chosen enough books to fill a small library, and had no way to get them all home without using magic.

Carefully setting all his purchases aside, he approached the clerk.

“Excuse me, my sister is going to be attending Hogwarts soon and I’m afraid we’ve picked out too many books for us to carry home.”

“What kind of trunk do you have, son?” Asked the clerk.

Harry’s eyebrows contract in confusion. “Trunk?”

The clerk rolled her eyes. “Muggleborn, right?” Harry nodded. “No problem, son, here’s what you want. Every Hogwarts student has

their own trunk to carry their robes, cauldrons, brooms, and such. The best place to pick one up is right down the street next to Eyelop's Owl Emporium, it's called Lockley's. Tell the clerk what you're looking for and he'll set you right up."

Harry thanked her for her help and had his items put on hold for him, then went in search of Jack and Row.

He found them in the corner with the Granger family they had met earlier, with Row listening avidly as Hermione explained all about the magical world.

"Oh, Harry!" Exclaimed Row when she saw him. "Hermione has offered to help me buy all my things for school, is it ok if she comes with us?"

Mr. Granger gave Harry a strange look, obviously surprised that she was asking the young boy for permission.

"That's fine Row," Harry replied. "Actually, I just discovered that we need to get you a trunk to hold all of your supplies, so why don't you and Jack go with Hermione while I get your trunk and we can meet up later." He turned to Hermione. "Is there a good meeting place around here?"

"Uh, well," Hermione stammered, blushing. "There's a nice ice cream parlor, Florean Fortescue's, it's right across the street."

"Ok then," Harry nodded. "We'll meet back there in, say, two hours? Is that enough time?" Hermione nodded. "Ok then, good luck." He gave Row a hug before whispering in her ear. "Remember, if anything goes wrong you run for it."

"I remember," she said, breaking the hug. "Honestly Harry, you worry too much, but--"

"That's why you love him," Jack finished in a singsong voice before laughing. "We know, now let's go buy magic stuff!" Row stuck her tongue out at him before following the Granger's outside. Before Jack could follow her, Harry grabbed his arm.

"Be careful Jack," he said in a low voice. "I'm going straight from the trunk store to the ice cream parlor. If something happens, find me there immediately."

Jack's face turned serious. "I got you mate, can't be too careful. I'll see you in an hour." Harry nodded and Jack hurried after his sister.

Walking quickly, Harry left the bookstore and made his way down the street toward Lockley's. As he passed Eyelop's Owl Emporium, he had the strange feeling that someone was watching him. He looked quickly to his right and found himself gazing directly into the amber eyes of a beautiful snowy owl. Harry found himself captivated by the owl's stare. It was so comfortable, so familiar, that he could swear he'd seen it somewhere before. Momentarily forgetting his errand, he stepped up the cage and hesitantly stroked the owl's head. The owl hooted softly in satisfaction.

"No use with that one, boy," said the shopkeeper as he came out of the shot. "Won't take to anybody at all, no matter how pretty she is to look at. I've tried to sell her 3 times, every time she comes back."

"How much?" Harry asked, ignoring the man's comments.

The shopkeeper frowned. "Didn't you hear me? She'll never stick around."

"I'll take my chances," Harry replied dryly. "How much?"

"Tell you what, you can have her for 7 galleons with a strict no-refund policy."

"Deal." Harry pulled out 7 galleons and handed them to the shopkeeper before opening the owl's cage. The owl immediately flew out and perched on Harry's shoulder as he walked next door to Lockley's, ignoring the shopkeeper's astonished look.

"What can I do for you son?" Asked a kindly old man from behind the counter. "I need a couple of trunks, both with plenty of room for books and such. One is for a Hogwarts student." Harry replied.

“Well then,” the man led Harry over to a wall that was covered with trunks of all shapes and sizes. “I’ve got a lot of options, so let’s see what fits for you.....”

Twenty minutes and over 100 galleons later, Harry left the shop with two wizarding trunks feeling very satisfied. Both trunks were wizarding trunks, and had 4 different compartments. The first was normal trunk size for appearances, in case he had to open the trunk in front of muggles. The second was magically enlarged with enough space that Harry could put his arm in up to the shoulder before touching the bottom, and contained a series of shelves on the sides for various belongings. The third compartment was slightly larger, but was magically shielded so that he could store “volatile ingredients” in it. Harry had no idea what he would be using “volatile ingredients” for, but decided it was better to be safe than sorry, especially where Row was concerned. The fourth and final compartment was Harry’s favorite, not only because it was large enough for him to climb down into, but also because it was outfitted as his own personal library, with enough shelving for roughly 400 books. Best of all, it weighed only as much as a normal trunk would, and the only added weight came from whatever Harry placed in the first compartment (another muggle precaution). All in all, Harry had to admit that the whole magic thing was turning out to be dead useful.

Walking back up the street, trunk in each hand and owl on his shoulder, Harry took the time to examine the wizards and witches bustling around the alley. At first he had thought that witches wore a very old style of dress, but on closer inspection he found that both men and women seemed to be wearing some kind of robes. Looking down at his own casual clothes, he realized just how out of place he must look, and decided that it would probably be best for him to get some wizarding clothes in case he wanted to come back here at a later date. He resolved to ask Hermione and her parents about it later.

Harry returned to the bookstore and paid for his purchases, once again thanking the clerk for her help, and then continued up the street to Florean’s Ice Cream Parlor. Checking his watch, he found he still had over an hour until he was due to meet the others and pulled out his copy of Modern Magical Culture to pass the time. He was in the

middle of reading about the Ministry of Magic when Row sat down beside him.

“Oh, Harry,” she breathed, looking at the owl perched on his shoulder. “She’s beautiful. What’s her name?”

Harry paused and looked at his feathered companion. “We haven’t gotten around to that yet. What do you think, girl?” Again Harry found himself looking at those familiar amber eyes.

“How about Snow?” Suggested Row. The owl hooted and ruffled her feather in disdain.

“Doesn’t look like that’s it,” laughed Jack as he joined them. “How about-“

“Hedwig,” Harry interrupted softly. The owl hooted in approval and rubbed her head against Harry’s cheek. “It’s Hedwig. Don’t ask me how I know, I just know.”

“Hedwig it is then,” stated Row. “I know I’ve said this before Harry,” grinned Jack. “But sometimes you’re right spooky.” Harry was about to reply when he was interrupted by Mr. Granger coming out of the parlor with 3 bowls of ice cream.

“Here you go, kids,” he said, placing a bowl in front of each of them. “If it’s no good, blame Hermione. She chose the flavor.”

“DAD!” Exclaimed Hermione, blushing furiously.

Jack laughed. “Bad ice cream? If you’ve found such a thing, I know it’s magic, because it simply doesn’t exist in the real world.”

With that the group began to talk about their shopping experiences. Harry showed Row the trunks he had purchased, and she was just as excited as he was at the prospect of a portable library. Hermione, too, seemed fascinated by the trunks, but was too hesitant to question Harry about them. Harry was glad for this, since it avoided the awkward question of why he had bought 2 trunks for 1 person.

Row told Harry all about all the shopping she and Hermione had done for school, including a story involving an old man who acted very strange (and a little creepy) who had sold Row her wand, which she immediately showed to Harry. Overall, everything had been relatively simple since she'd had Hermione's help, and Row thanked her profusely for her assistance. The group sat and talked about various topics for a while, but all too soon it was time to return home. Row thanked the Granger's again for all their help and promised to look for Hermione on the train on September 1st. Once they had packed all of Row's school supplies into her trunk, the trio exited back into muggle London and returned home, each of them pondering their first experiences in the world of magic.

A/N Ok, I know it's not very exciting but there you go. Thanks to everyone who reviewed, especially Pottersparks for all his feedback and ideas. Next chapter we get to see how Row likes Hogwarts.

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts

Minerva McGonagall was exhausted. She had spent her entire day escorting new muggleborn students to and from Diagon Alley and answering their questions. It was an important job, to be sure. But incredibly tiring nonetheless.

Reaching the door to the headmaster's office, she knocked quickly and waited. When she got no reply, she let herself into the office to find it empty.

"Strange..." She murmured to herself and she looked at the empty seat behind the headmaster's desk. Just as she was turning to leave, the fire flared green and Albus Dumbledore stepped gracefully into the office.

"Ah Minerva," he greeted serenely, "I apologize for my absence, I'm afraid our dear minister saw fit to keep me in chambers all day discussing several rather mundane matters. Please, take a seat." She did. "How are our new students looking this year?"

"Excited, as always, Albus," McGonagall replied. "And full of questions. Always full of questions."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Yes, that would appear to be a common trait. Tell me, did-" Dumbledore stopped suddenly as his eyes were drawn to a letter sitting in one of the many different trays on his desk.

"What is it, Albus?" Asked McGonagall, concerned.

"It seems I have a missive from a friend at Gringotts," Dumbledore replied, opening the letter. He scanned it quickly before jumping to his feet and hurrying to the fireplace.

"I'm afraid we shall have to continue this discussion later, Minerva. An urgent matter has come to my attention." He threw the floo powder in the fireplace and shouted, "GRINGOTTS!"

"Oh my god, it says here that the entire ceiling of the great hall is spelled to look like the sky. That's so cool!"

"Row, if you say one more thing about Hogwarts is "so cool," I'm going to throw that book out the window." Jack grumbled. "Besides, what you should be reading about is that flying broomsticks game. What was it, Kidditch?"

"Quidditch," Row replied, enunciating carefully. "And it's hardly my fault that Hogwarts is such a great place to go to school. You're just jealous because you're going to back to normal school."

Jack scowled. "Still don't see why, pretty stupid if you ask me."

"Because you don't have to work anymore, Jack," said Harry as he entered the living room. "So now we can think about the future. The only reason we dropped out in the first place was because we had to make a living. With the money in the vault, that's all been taken care of, so we can get back to being normal."

"Screw normal," snorted Jack. "Normal is for pansies."

"You have to admit, Harry," put in a smiling Row, "we are a decidedly abnormal family."

"How is this going to work, anyway?" Jack asked Harry suddenly. "I can't go to school looking like I'm 20 years old, but you can't take the illusion off either, at least not until I'm officially of age."

"I've already thought of that," replied Harry. "I've hired a tutor, for both of us, I might add. She's agreed to teach us 3 days a week until you turn 18. Then you can test for your High School equivalency. You'll also be of age, and I'll be able to remove the illusion."

Jack scratched his chin. "I don't know," he said slowly. "Some of the girls at the pier seem to like this look..." Harry gave him a warning look. "I know, I know, be careful. It just sucks that nobody I meet every actually sees me for who I am..." Jack trailed off.

Harry's face softened. "I know it's not easy, Jack," he said quietly. "But it's only a couple more years, which isn't so bad when you consider what we've got here."

Jack smiled. "I know, Harry, I'm just complaining for the hell of it. I was never very good in school."

"Well, you had a lot on your mind back then," Harry replied thoughtfully. "Now you're much more carefree, maybe it will come easier."

Jack laughed. "Well, you're right about the carefree bit. Even working like a slave on the dock's felt like heaven when I knew I was coming back to a real home."

"Yeah," said Harry softly. "I know what you mean."

"Oh you guys!" Shouted a sniffling Row as she grabbed them both in a group hug. "I'm gonna miss you!"

"There, there," soothed Jack. "We've got that owl, we'll write every day. And you know you're going to love Hogwarts and everything about it."

"Everything will be alright, Row," said Harry softly. "Everything will be alright, I promise."

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts, the next morning

"Enter, Severus."

Severus Snape entered the headmaster's office to find Professors McGonagall and Flitwick already seated and waiting.

Snape quirked an eyebrow. "I was not aware of a staff meeting," he drawled.

"Indeed, this is not a regular staff meeting," said Dumbledore, twinkling madly. "I have just received some information about our wayward Mr. Potter that I would like to share."

"What news, Albus?" Asked an astonished McGonagall.

"Last night I received a missive from a friend of mine at Gringotts. He told me that the Potter vault was accessed yesterday, and a tidy sum of both wizarding and muggle money was withdrawn."

"The goblins actually told you?" Asked Snape incredulously. "I was under the impression that they refused to provide any information like this to other wizards."

Dumbledore's twinkle went into overdrive. "At my age, I have acquired friends in many places, Severus."

"Of course, headmaster," Snape conceded. "Were you able to acquire any more information? If there was anyone with him, perhaps? Or how he obtained a key?"

"Unfortunately, even my information is quite limited when it involves the goblins," Dumbledore replied. "However, the fact that he is aware of the wizarding world raises many new questions regarding his disappearance. It is possible that he has been right under our noses all along."

"With a wizarding family?" Squeaked Flitwick. "How is this possible?"

"The same way it would be possible for him to walk into Gringotts unnoticed," replied Dumbledore evenly. "In disguise."

"To think," McGonagall was shaking her head, "I could have walked right past him yesterday and never known it."

"Indeed Minerva, but don't let it trouble you," soothed Dumbledore. "If I had been able to leave the minister's company earlier, I may have received the missive in time to find Mr. Potter myself."

"This is all well and good," interjected Snape with a sneer, "But what exactly are you proposing, Headmaster?"

"If Mr. Potter was in Diagon Alley yesterday shopping for supplies, it would stand to reason that he was doing so either for or with a Hogwarts student," Dumbledore explained carefully. "It is therefore likely that he will also make an appearance at Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ at some point on September first. What I propose is this: we will spell the barrier at Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ to dispel any and all magical means of disguise for all who walk through it. I would also like Professor Flitwick," he nodded at the small man, "to come up with a way to remove any muggle means of disguise, as well. A modified scourgify will do nicely to remove make-up or hair dye, I believe."

"But Albus," interrupted McGonagall, "won't this cause problems for everyone else walking through the barrier? And even if we do succeed in unmasking Mr. Potter, how will we know what he looks like?"

"It may be an inconvenience to some," replied Dumbledore evenly. "But it will not be harmful, and we can always say it was simply a student prank," he winked conspiratorially before turning serious. "Of course we cannot know for certain what Mr. Potter will look like, but we can reasonably state that he will have his father's black hair and his mother's eyes. Apart from that, I'm afraid we shall have to look for scar; there is no other way." Dumbledore looked at each other then in turn. "I cannot impress upon you enough the importance of finding Mr. Potter should he appear. That is why I would like the three of you, as well as myself, to be watching the barrier in shifts throughout the day. It is imperative that he be returned safely to our world."

King's Cross Station, September 1st

"Jesus, Row, what did you put in this thing?" Complained Jack as he carried her trunk toward the platform.

“Uh, Row?” Harry asked cautiously, “you did remember that you could have put all the heavy stuff in the second compartment right? That way the trunk wouldn’t be any heavier.”

“Of course I did,” Row replied sweetly. “I also knew that Jack would be the one carrying the trunk, so I decided to repay him for his little stunt yesterday.”

Jack groaned. “I should have known you’d do something like that.”

Row smirked. “Well, next time you feel the need to put a stink bomb in my library perhaps you’ll remember that.” Harry just shook his head and smiled at their antics.

The two weeks since Diagon Alley had been stupendously boring for the young trio. Harry and Row had spent nearly all their time reading their new books and discussing the similarities between Harry’s magic and Hogwarts magic. They had found that many of the spells that Harry could do actually had official names, and were listed in The Standard Book of Spells. Of course, all this reading had started getting to Jack, who made it his mission to prank his siblings as often as possible, hence the stink bomb.

“Ok,” Row said, stopping. “Here it is. Hermione said that you have to walk right into the barrier between platform’s 9 and 10. It’s a false wall, or something, and you end up on the platform for the Hogwarts Express.”

“Ok,” said Harry, studying the wall. “I’ll go first and check it out. If it’s safe, I’ll come back and we’ll all go in together.”

“Harry,” Row began, exasperated.

“Let him go,” Jack laughed, before whispering, “I think he likes this 007 stuff.”

“I heard that,” said Harry called over his shoulder as he approached the barrier. “Back in a minute.” With that, he walked through.

The instant Harry reached the other side, he knew something was wrong. He suddenly felt different, like he had lost something...

My illusion! He thought frantically. It's gone.

Quickly, he turned to walk back through the barrier when a strong hand grabbed his shoulder. Instinctively, Harry reached for the arm and twisted, eliciting a hiss of pain from behind him. Releasing the arm, Harry turned to face his attacker.

"Well, well, well," hissed Severus Snape. "Famous Harry Potter, all alone?" He sneered as he drew his wand. "Assaulting a professor already Potter?"

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Who are you? And what the hell are you talking about, 'assaulting a professor?' You attacked me!"

"Such arrogance for a boy so young," hissed Snape. "You're coming with me, Potter. Now come along like a good boy or I'll have to make you." He grinned evilly.

Harry immediately crouched in a defensive stance. "I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what the hell is going on."

"Very well, Potter." Snape snapped his wand at Harry. "Incar-"

Reacting immediately, Harry quickly closed the distance between them and grabbed Snape by his wand hand. Before Snape could react, Harry spun his body and twisted, causing Snape to drop his wand and grab his nearly broken arm. Turning swiftly, Harry threw a banishing charm at Snape's chest, sending him flying across the station into a wall. Without another glance, Harry teleported himself back outside the barrier to Jack and Row.

"What the hell, Harry?" Questioned Jack when he reappeared.

"Quiet!" Snapped Harry. With a wave he made himself invisible and drew Jack and Row to a nearby bench.

“Ok, here’s the deal. When I went through the barrier, it cancelled my illusion somehow and that same professor was waiting for me. He knew my name and tried to get me to come with him. When I refused, he tried to subdue me with magic. I knocked him out and teleported back here.”

Both Jack and Row sat there, stunned.

“He attacked you?” Row asked in a small voice.

“Yeah, I don’t know why though.” Harry said, frustrated. “Hell, I don’t even know how he knew my name. How did he know I was coming? What the hell is going on?”

“Harry, calm down,” Jack whispered frantically. “People can still hear you!”

“Sorry,” replied an abashed Harry.

“Don’t worry about it mate, nobody could have expected this. Listen; if the barrier cancels your illusions, I think the best thing is to part ways here. Row doesn’t have an illusion to worry about, and they have no idea that you were with her. I hate to say it, but we should get you out of here as soon as possible.”

“But what if they’re looking for all of us?” Interjected Row.

Harry shook his invisible head. “He called me Harry Potter, not Harry Thomas.”

“That’s weird,” put in Jack. “You haven’t used that name for a long time. You think that means it’s still safe for Row to go through?”

Harry sighed heavily. “I don’t know, I just don’t know. I can’t go back in there, and you can’t go in there either. But at the same time, I really don’t want to send Row in by herself. This is a really bad situation, and we need to make a decision quick.”

"What if you teleported back in there? Would your illusion get cancelled again?" Row asked.

"I don't want to risk it," Harry responded. "I took him by surprise last time, and he was alone."

"So we either cut and run, in which case they almost certainly send somebody to find out why Row didn't show up, or Row goes in there by herself." Jack reasoned. "I say we roll the dice and let her go."

"I really don't like this." Replied Harry slowly. "This is the second time I've been attacked by a wizard for no reason." He sighed heavily. "Still, it would appear that it's only me that he was after, so if you still want to go, it should be ok."

"Are you sure?" Row Questioned. "Somebody just attacked you!"

"Yeah, but Jack's right. Nobody knows you were involved, and I should get out of here before they start looking."

"The first time they came after you for doing magic, right?" Asked Jack.

"Yeah," sighed Harry. "I always do seem to attract trouble."

"Don't worry, Harry," sniffed Row. "I'll find out why they were after you, and I'll send you an owl tonight with whatever I can learn." She felt Harry draw her into a hug, which she tearfully returned.

"Take care of yourself, sis," Jack said quietly as he joined the hug. "If you need anything, you let us know."

"I will." Row picked up her trunk and, with a last look, walked through the barrier.

"I really hope we're not making a mistake, Jack."

Jack sighed. "We're not Harry. As much as you want to protect her, you can't protect her from everything. That's life; sometimes, you just gotta take a chance." He shrugged. "This will be good for all of us,

you'll see. A couple of years from now you'll look back on this and laugh at yourself for being so worried."

Harry didn't reply as they made their way quickly back out of the train station. For some reason, he felt like he'd just jumped into the deep end of a swimming pool without knowing how to swim. He hoped that Jack was right, but couldn't stop a sneaking suspicion that in a couple of years, laughter would be the last thing on his mind.

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts

Dumbledore sighed heavily as he ushered professors McGonagall and Flitwick into his office.

"Did you find him, Albus?" Inquired McGonagall. "Did he come as predicted?"

"He did, indeed, Minerva," Dumbledore replied. "Unfortunately, we seem to have underestimated young Mr. Potter, and were unable to hold on to him."

"My word!" Exclaimed Flitwick. "What happened?"

"It was Severus who spotted him," Dumbledore began as he took his seat. "He came through the barrier alone and, according to Severus, 'strutting like he owned the place.' Apparently he gets the majority of his features from his father." Dumbledore twinkled slightly at this. "Unfortunately, it would appear that he felt antagonized by Severus's presence," McGonagall snorted, "and they had a small altercation. I do not yet have all the details, but it would appear that Mr. Potter did sufficient damage to warrant a stay in the hospital for our potions master."

"How, Albus?" Asked an astonished McGonagall.

"I'm afraid I do not know, Minerva," Dumbledore replied absently. "Severus was less than forthcoming with details, as you can imagine."

"Can we locate him through other means now that he has been seen?" Asked Flitwick.

Dumbledore shook his head. "I'm afraid not. It appears that as far as our spells go, his location has not changed."

"That damn cupboard," murmured McGonagall.

Dumbledore's face fell sadly. "Indeed."

"What is to be done now?"

Dumbledore leaned back and steepled his fingers in thought. "I'm afraid there isn't much we can do. The students will be arriving on the express shortly, and we have a term to start. We can only hope that eventually Mr. Potter will reappear to us."

The two professors nodded and made their way out of the office, preparing to greet the students for the start of a new term.

A/N Ok, I know I said we'd see how Row likes Hogwarts in this chapter but I decided to split this chapter into two because it was a good place to break. The next chapter will be up soon.

Answers to some review questions (btw, is this the best place to respond to reviews?)

1. Yes, Harry will definitely go to Hogwarts (it's not that AU)
2. This is Hermione's second year, not her first. The troll incident already happened the year before (if you look at the beginning of chapter 3, you can see McGonagall and Dumbledore talking about it). Row is a year younger than Harry and that's why she's getting a letter now (this is the Chamber of Secrets year). Also, I should note that Jack is actually 3 years older than Harry, so it's not that long until he turns 18.
3. Harry can't be found by owls and such because his magical location is still the cupboard under the stairs.

4. About Harry's vault situation: Basically, I gave Harry access to the same vault he has access to in canon, which I believe is a trust vault that he was supposed to already have access to. The way I see it, everything about Harry's affairs got really screwed up when Dumbledore sent him to live with the Dursleys, and you'll have to wait a while until everything gets sorted out (I do have a plan though).

5. Jarno mentioned that it would be easier if Harry went to Hogwarts this year. I agree it would be easier, but I don't think it's realistic. He never got a letter and doesn't even know if he was accepted, or if he is even technically a wizard. He could ask somebody from Hogwarts, but he doesn't trust adults, especially wizards. (Remember, he only met 2, and they attacked him). Harry will come out of this shell eventually, but it will not happen overnight.

Special Note:

This is my first real fanfic, so if there's something you think I missed or messed up, it's very possible that you're right. Shreve brought up an excellent point about the ministry being able to track down Harry after he escaped from Arthur Weasley. Although I mentioned that he changed the illusions on himself and Row and that they took a break from performing, I still pretty much glossed over the ministry looking for them. I hope to get better about things like this as I go along. Also, I never was much of a grammar guy, so if I don't capitalize something I should and it drives you nuts, I apologize. Thanks for reading!

-the Jack

September 1

Dear Jack and Harry,

Harry, I don't know how to say this, so I'm just going to say it.

You're famous in the wizarding world.

When I found Hermione on the train, I asked her if she knew what happened with the professor that got knocked out. She said he had been trying to apprehend somebody, but nobody knew who. I told her I'd heard somebody mention the name Potter, and instantly she asked "Harry Potter? Really?" Really excited. (I made her promise not to tell anyone what I heard, though). I asked her what the big deal was, and this is what she said:

Basically, 10 or 15 years ago there was a really evil wizard who was threatening to take over the wizarding world. He was so bad, that even to this day nobody will say his name, and always say "he-who-must-not-be-named," or "you-know-you" when they want to talk about him. I finally convinced Hermione to write it down for me, and the guy's name was Lord Voldemort. He and his followers, called Death Eaters, were big into blood purity, which basically means that they wanted to make sure that only pure-blooded wizards could do magic. I'm still a little unclear what this means, exactly, so you'll have to wait until I can do some research and can explain it better.

Anyway, Voldemort and the Death Eaters killed a lot of people and basically acted like terrorists, putting the whole wizarding world in a panic. Then, on October 31, 1981, he attacked you and your parents. Your mom and dad didn't die in a car crash, Harry. They were murdered.

Your parents names were James and Lily Potter, and you lived together at a place called Godric's Hollow. Voldemort attacked on Halloween and killed both your parents using a really dark magic curse called 'Avada Kedavra,' more commonly called the killing curse. Basically, it kills whatever it touches, and Voldemort used it to kill both your parents.

This is where it really gets weird, and nobody really knows what happened next. Apparently, Voldemort tried to use the same curse on you, but for some reason it backfired and hit him instead, effectively killing him and leaving you with the lightning bolt scar on your forehead. That's why you're famous, Harry. You are the only person in history ever to survive the killing curse, AND you defeated the darkest wizard in recent history when you were only a year old. To most of the wizarding world, you're known as the 'boy-who-lived'.

I asked another girl about you, her name is Ginny Weasley (her father was the redhead that attacked us, I'll tell you more about that later). Anyway, she went on and on about how you were this amazing hero and she'd heard the story a thousand times. I don't know how you're going to take this Harry, but apparently you were her favorite bedtime story growing up.

I asked Hermione why they would attack you on the platform if you were such a hero, and she said that most of the wizarding world thinks you've been kidnapped. Part of the story is that after your parents were killed, you were hidden away in a safe place, but nobody knows exactly where or who hid you. When you didn't come to Hogwarts last year (yes, you were supposed to get a letter), people started asking questions and there was a big scandal about how nobody knew where you were. This happened because you didn't come to Hogwarts like everybody expected. I have no idea why you didn't get your letter, but according to Hermione it's common knowledge that Harry Potter should be at Hogwarts.

Ok, it's getting late and my hand is already cramping from writing with this strange quill. I have loads to tell you about Hogwarts, the sorting ceremony, and all kinds of other things but I'll save them for tomorrow and send this out tonight since it's important.

Love,

Row

September 2

Dear Row,

From now on, address all your letters to Jack only. If you have to refer to me, call me James in case your letters are ever read by someone else.

I really don't know what to think about your last letter, I just wanted to write to tell you that I got it and to thank you for working so hard to find out. If Harry Potter really is that famous, I should be able to find some references in the history books I bought. I have a million thoughts in my head right now, and I have to think before I try to write any of it down. Here's Jack.

Hey sis, just wanted to get on and wish you luck with everything at Hogwarts. Who could have guessed that our James was rich AND famous? I swear, it's never a dull moment with him around. Anyway, do your best to make friends and have some fun out there. You deserve it.

Love,

Jack and

James

September 5

Dear Jack and James,

I know I promised to write sooner, but I've been really busy. First of all, I got sorted into Ravenclaw! I know James has already read the beginning of Hogwarts: A History so you can tell Jack about what that means. It was weird, they put a hat on my head and it started talking to me! I could feel it going through my head while it decided what house to put me in, it felt like when James does his mind tricks, but softer.

I don't get to see Hermione as much I thought, she's a Gryffindor, so I really only get to see her in the library. My roommates are ok I guess, but most of them seem really boring. One of them is cool though, her name is Sarah and she's a muggleborn. I tell people I'm muggleborn too, since it's easier to explain how I don't know anything about wizard customs. I'm still feeling a little shy around all these new people, but I'm adjusting.

The castle is amazing. There are real ghosts here, like actual dead people that talk and everything! The great hall is just like the book says and the library is HUGE! I could stay in there for a year and not read half the titles, and that's not even counting the restricted section!

And using a wand to do magic is SOOOO much easier! James, you wouldn't believe how easy it is to do the same spells using a wand. Remember how I was having problems lifting the table? It would be a piece of cake now. It's amazing, like I hardly need to concentrate at all.

Actually, that brings me to a possible problem. You remember how we thought there might be laws against doing magic sometimes? Well, it turns out it IS illegal to magic in front of muggles, and Ginny's dad (his name is Arthur) is one of the guy's responsible for chasing down people that use magic on regular objects. That's what they thought we were doing when they came after us; it had nothing to do with you specifically, James.

It's also illegal for students to do magic until they're 17, which is the wizarding age of adulthood. That means that students wands have all have some sort of tracking spell on them, and if you do any magic outside of school, you can be expelled. It also means that if James gets caught doing magic, he's going to be in even more trouble than we thought, although it appears that they can't detect magic done without a wand, so as long as nobody sees you, you're safe.

Also, I was asking Hermione about wandless magic and she said that it's very uncommon for a witch or wizard to be able to do any serious magic without a wand. Basically she said that small levitations or summoning isn't completely uncommon, but anything stronger (like

stunners) it practically unheard of. Do you think I can show her and Sarah my wandless skills, or should I keep them secret?

Love,

Row

September 8

Dear Row,

We've decided on an official format for your letters. James will write first and Jack will write second, so without further ado, here's James.

I'm glad to hear everything is going well, it will come as no surprise that I was very worried when we left you on the platform. Things here are going well, Jack and I are still training with master Choi and we have lessons with Ms. Johnston 3 times a week, so we're keeping busy.

If you want to show your friends what you can do without a wand, I think it's fine, as long as you don't tell them you had someone teaching you. You're at a magic school now, so there's no reason to hold any of your skills back. I kind of figured you'd be a Ravenclaw when I read about the houses, congratulations.

That's interesting what you say about a wand. Now that I can read about spell theory, everything seems to be easier for me as well (I conveniently ignore the part about wand movements). Have you had Defense Against the Dark Arts yet? I'm really interested to see what they teach you there; the book I bought doesn't really describe what 'dark arts' are.

I still don't know what to think about Harry Potter and Hogwarts. I found some books that had info about Harry Potter, so I'm reading them now. I'm finding it hard to accept that he's a famous wizard, but I'm adjusting. I just don't understand how he can be famous but sent to live in hell and forgotten. I still don't know what to think about that.

If you can, I'd like you try and find out who was supposed to be responsible for him if his parents died. There had to be somebody designated in a will or something (I refuse to believe that his parents would condone where he was sent). Remember if you need anything, send Hedwig immediately.

Love, James

Hey sis, it's your favorite brother. You need to tell James that not all of us are super human; that guy's a menace! Master Choi is sadistic, as always, and Ms. Johnston is a bloody nightmare! She's way worse than a regular teacher: she gives enough homework in 3 days to last a bloody month! Sorry about the language, but you know I never liked school. Still, it beats working for a living, right?

Harry told me about how Ravenclaw is the bookworm house, and although I can't say I didn't expect it, I still think you should try to have some fun this year. You live in a castle, for god's sake, there are probably all kinds of secret passages just waiting to be used. LIFE IS FUN! Remember that. Study hard too, though, because that's also important.

Ok, that last part didn't really make sense and Harry is making use of this stupid quill thing so I don't know how to erase. BLAST! Anyway, write back soon.

Love,

Jack

September 21

Dear Jack and James,

I don't really have much to say, my classes are going really well, especially charms with Professor Flitwick (he's my head of house). I always get extra points in that class because most of the stuff we're learning I already learned from James. My second favorite class is

Transfiguration with Professor McGonagall (she's head of Gryffindor). It's probably the coolest kind of magic, I even saw the professor turn herself into a cat! It was really cool.

I'm sorry to disappoint you James, but Defense Against the Dark Arts is a pretty worthless class. The teacher is supposed to be a big wizard hero, but all he does is sit around and talk about himself. He even gave us a quiz that asked us what his favorite color was! No, I'm not kidding Jack.

The only class worse than that is potions, taught by Professor Snape (he's the head of Slytherin, and the one who attacked you). He's really mean to everybody in my class (we have potions with Hufflepuff), and I swear he's always looking at me, but I can never seem to catch him. In any case, he gives me the creeps. You'll be happy to know that the whole school thinks he got beat up by a student at the train station, but nobody knows who it was (wink).

I get to see Hermione in the library a lot, and we're pretty good friends now. It's weird, because it seems like she doesn't have any friends in her own house, and other than me she's almost always by herself, and she's really shy. I want to ask her about it, but I don't want to be rude. Sarah and I are also good friends now, and there's an older girl in my house, her name is Padma, she's cool too. I also see Ginny Weasley every now and then since we have some classes together, but there's something off about her, and her older brothers are really annoying (although they would get along famously with you, Jack). Their family is HUGE though, and they're all in Gryffindor.

Anyway, things are going good here, I'm really glad I came. I think that Harry Potter would like it here.

Love,

Row

September 27

Dear Row,

From now on you should use school owls to send your notes, since I may be using Hedwig for other deliveries.

I understand what you're saying about Harry Potter enjoying Hogwarts, but you have to consider the fact that maybe him ending up where he did was not an accident. Somebody left him on that doorstep, and that somebody was almost certainly a wizard. Until we know more about his situation, it's probably best that things stay the way they are. There is plenty of time for Harry Potter to come to Hogwarts later if he decides to.

I'm progressing though the magic books I bought much more quickly than I thought I would. Charms especially seem to come easily to me, since they seem to require less concentration than Transfiguration. Hexes and curses come rather easily as well, although not quite as easily as charms. Still, I think that by Christmas I will be done with at least the majority of the books that I bought I'm planning another trip to Diagon Alley soon for more books, so if there is anything you want, let me know. Remember if there is anything at all that you need, let us know immediately.

Love, James

Hey sis. You will not believe what master Choi has James and I doing: James has to wear a blindfold when we're training and even a little around the house, and I am "encouraged to attack him at random intervals." Can you believe that? Supposedly he's going to learn how to sense attacks coming and react without his sight. What this really means is that I finally get some payback for all the thrashings I get at the dojo, because so far he's terrible. Heh, fun for me though.

You wouldn't believe how boring James is these days. All he goes is read, plan, train, study, or think about reading, planning, training, or studying. I know we've had this conversation before, Row, but this isn't healthy for a 12 year old kid. I'm three years older than him and yet it's obvious he's the one always looking out for me. I'm beginning

to think that life with those Dursleys was even worse than he let on, and maybe he has scars that even his magic can't heal.

I'm glad to hear things are going well for you out there. I miss you too.

Love,

Jack

October 11

Dear Jack and James

I know it's been a long time, but it seems like every time I'm going to write a letter I find out something new. I have so much to tell you that I don't even know where to start.

I finally asked Hermione why she doesn't have any friends in her own house, and she ended up telling me about her first year at Hogwarts. Apparently, a lot of people in her house didn't like the way she acted in class because she always knew the answers and loved to ask questions. Some of them started calling her names, and last year on Halloween this guy named Ron (he's another one of Ginny's brothers, Hermione's age though), he said some really nasty things about her when he thought she couldn't hear, and she ended up crying in the bathroom. Problem is, somehow a Troll got into the school and went into the same bathroom. Trolls are usually between 10 and 15 feet tall and they're really strong and vicious. Hermione was seriously injured, and ended up in the wizard hospital in serious condition. This was really hard for her to tell, and she was crying by the end of it. Ever since then, her housemates tend to leave her alone and she returns the favor. It's really sad, actually, but I don't really know what I can do about it.

This brings me to some really disturbing news: Lord Voldemort might still be alive. I know everybody says that Harry Potter defeated him, but according to Hermione, he's still alive and actually possessed a teacher at the school last year. I got some of this story from Hermione

and the older girls in my house, but most of it came from a really large man named Hagrid who's the Hogwarts groundskeeper. Basically, this is what I pieced together:

Headmaster Dumbledore hid something really valuable in Hogwarts last year behind a bunch of traps and enchantments (nobody knows exactly what, but Hagrid slipped once and called it 'the stone'). Professor Quirrell, who was the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, lured Dumbledore away from the school and tried to steal it at the end of the year. Fortunately, whatever safeguards Dumbledore had in place to guard the stone succeeded, and kept him from getting it. Dumbledore came back to the school and went to check on the stone, found Quirrell, and killed him. I'm still unsure whether he meant to kill him, or whether it was an accident (Hagrid thinks it was an accident). What they all agree on is that Quirrell was being possessed by Lord Voldemort, and that when Dumbledore expelled Voldemort from the body, Quirrell died.

Hermione told me that everyone in the school knows that the professor was killed, but only a few believe that it was Voldemort that was responsible. Dumbledore announced an abridged version at the end of term feast, where he said that Quirrell had been trying to steal an important item and had not survived the enchantments protecting it. Hermione claims that she and several other Gryffindor first years overheard a conversation between two professors where they specifically said that Quirrell had been possessed by Lord Voldemort, and Dumbledore had arrived just in time to drive him out, thus killing Quirrell. Hagrid unwittingly confirmed this theory for us when we asked him if it was true.

As if this wasn't enough of a bombshell, I found out who put Harry Potter with the muggles. When I told Hermione I wanted to learn about things about Harry Potter that you couldn't find in books, she said that she had seen Hagrid crying one night after it came out that Harry Potter was missing, so maybe I should talk to him (this is also when we confirmed the stories about Quirrell).

I asked Hagrid if he knew anything about the muggles that Harry Potter went to live with. At first he was surprised that I knew he was living with muggles, but I convinced him I'd done some good

detective work and he bought it. At first he said he couldn't tell me anything about it, but Hagrid isn't the sharpest tool in the shed, and eventually he let something big slip.

It turns out that it was Hagrid himself who brought Harry Potter from Godric's Hollow to Privet Drive the night the Potter's were killed. Once he realized what he'd said, he made me promise that I wouldn't tell anybody else, because he could "get some good people into a lot of trouble". I promised that no trouble would be caused because of what he told me, if he would answer the rest of my questions. He agreed.

So, why did Hagrid take Harry to Privet Drive? Because Albus Dumbledore told him to. Albus Dumbledore was the one who made the decision to put Harry Potter with the muggles. I asked him why Dumbledore got to decide where to place him, and why it didn't come from the Potter's will. He said that the reasons were a secret (I didn't want to press too much), but essentially all of Harry Potter's other family was dead, and most of the Potter's friends had also been killed in the war. He also said that they all recognized Dumbledore as their leader, and trusted him to do the right thing. Basically, no one questioned him when he said that Harry Potter was safe.

I can only image the shock that you're feeling right now, James. I can hardly believe that it was the headmaster who made the decision, but there it is. Remember that I love you (and you too Jack), and I miss you both terribly.

Love,

Row

October 18

Dear Row,

I've come up with a way for us to communicate without these ridiculous codes (they weren't very smart anyway). I've charmed this

paper so that only you, Jack, and I can read it. When you want to write back, you have to touch your wand to the paper, concentrate on clearing it, and say "clarus." I've attached the directions for the spell from one of my books in case you have a problem.

I have spent the last few days reading everything I could find about Albus Dumbledore. He appears to be the pinnacle of wizarding achievement; everything I read praises him for both his brilliance in magic and his social contributions to the wizarding world. He seems to have all the qualities that a wizard should aspire to be. He also seems to be very powerful politically.

I am having a very hard time resolving this man with the man who left me with the Dursleys. There is no way that a wizard of his intelligence would have simply dropped me off on the doorstep without a second thought. He must have done some research into what sort of family the Dursleys were and what Petunia thought of her sister. That means that one of two things happened: either his information was completely wrong, or he KNEW. HE KNEW that they would hate me, and he left me there anyway. If Albus Dumbledore is half the wizard that the history books claim he is, the second option is the only one that makes sense.

If he did know what kind of hell he was putting me into, why did he do it? Would he try to do it again? From what you've told me, he can do pretty much whatever he wants without question, which means that he could force me to live somewhere else, away from you and Jack. Again, if half of what they write is true, I seriously doubt that I could stop him.

Don't take this the wrong way, but I'm beginning to think that it would be best if I never have any contact with the magical world, and live my life as a muggle. In the magical world, I have a headmaster who condemned me to a life of suffering and would be in a position to do it again, AND I have the spirit of an evil wizard that probably hates my guts running around trying to find another body to possess. The only reason to come to Hogwarts would be to do magic, and I can already do that. I know you want me to come to Hogwarts with you, Row, and truthfully I think I'd really like to, in a perfect world. But the last thing I'm going to do is trap myself in a position that I can't fight my way out

of. Maybe if I can come up with some way to stay in control, I'll consider it. I hope you understand.

Jack wrote you a letter but I can't find it here, so he'll have to send it later (plus it's not on the new secure parchment). We miss you.

Love,

Harry

P.S. On my last trip to Diagon Alley I found out that I can teleport to the town of Hogsmede, which is right next to Hogwarts, and then run up to the castle from there. That means that if you ever need me, I can be there as soon as I get your owl.

October 21

Dear Jack and Harry,

First of all, Harry, this new parchment is brilliant. Hermione saw me writing on it and couldn't stop asking how I made it (snicker). Of course, ever since I showed her and Sarah my wandless abilities, they expect that sort of thing from me. :-)

I understand what you're saying about Hogwarts, and I won't try to argue with you in a letter. You're going to get an earful at Christmas, however.

The real reason I'm writing to you is that I found out that what you call teleporting is actually called apparating, and like everything else in the wizarding world, you have to be 17 before you can be licensed to do it legally. One of the girls in my dorm has a dad who works at the ministry of magic, and she told me that it basically works the same way as a driver's license. The ministry can't trace all apparition, but occasionally the aurors (wizard police) will set up a checkpoint at a popular area, like Diagon Alley, and anyone without a license apparating in will be automatically tagged and ticketed. It's like a muggle speed trap. There are other ways to get caught, of course,

but this is the one that you should worry about. So next time you're going to teleport, be careful. It certainly wouldn't do for Harry Potter to be picked up by aurors for underage apparition.

Classes are still going well for me, I've even gotten a little better at potions. Nothing especially exciting has happened, although my house prefect, Penelope, swears that there's no such thing as a quiet year at Hogwarts.

Jack, you really have to meet these Weasley twins sometime (the older brothers I told you about), they take pranks and mischief to a whole different level. I actually saw them turn two 2nd year boys into human sized chickens, complete with feathers. Think you can compete with that?

Love,

Row

October 26

Dear Row,

Harry hogged the last letter, so this one's just from me. Harry made two more of these secure papers, so we don't have to wait for each other to write back to use one.

These twins sound like my kind of folks. Magical pranks? Maybe next time Harry goes to Diagon Alley I'll sneak along and pick some up (that way I'll actually have a chance of getting him).

Remember when I said Harry was terrible at sensing his surroundings? Well, that didn't last long. He still can't beat me in a fight with a blindfold on, but I can't take him by surprise anymore, even if it's just throwing a pillow at him. Pretty soon he'll be able to beat me with his eyes closed. Literally.

Things are going pretty good for me lately. Ms. Johnston is still a nightmare, but since I can't go to a regular secondary school, I guess I can't complain. It's a small price to pay for life I have here.

Some days I can't believe things turned out the way they did, and I'm not just talking about the magic thing. You remember when the old man caught us coming home really late the night after we met Harry? I remember thinking that I was going to die before I ever got out of that house, and now here I am, completely free and without a care in the world. That's why I'm always hounding you to be silly and have some fun; we have to make up for lost time!

I hope everything is still going well for you at Hogwarts.

Love,

Jack

November 2

Dear Jack and Harry,

Well, it looks like Penelope was right, there IS no such thing as a quiet year at Hogwarts. A couple days ago, somebody petrified a cat that belonged to the Hogwarts caretaker, Mr. Filch. There was a message on the wall saying that something called the "Chamber of Secrets" had been opened, but nobody seems to know what that is. Hermione says that the teachers all looked really worried, but I don't know why. I mean, it was just a cat, and petrification can be cured. It looks more like a student prank than anything else. Still, it can't hurt to find out more about this chamber of secrets (there's no mention of it in *Hogwarts: A History*).

Other than that things are pretty much the same. My classes have gotten a little harder, but I still haven't come across anything that I couldn't do. My friend Sarah really wants to meet you guys, she says that every other sentence out of my mouth has the words "my brothers," in it.

Oh, I forgot to tell you that I had my first flying lesson already. It was brilliant! It was a little awkward at first, but once I got the hang of it it's absolutely incredible. The first Quidditch match of the year is coming up in a couple weeks, and I can't wait to see what it's like. If it's as fun as it sounds, I just might have to learn how to play (although Hermione says it's actually boring, I don't believe her).

Christmas is coming up fast, and I can't wait to see you guys.

Love,

Row

November 17

Dear Jack and Harry,

Ok, here's the deal with the Chamber of Secrets. Supposedly, Salazar Slytherin (Harry, tell Jack who he is) had a big disagreement with the other three founders about whether or not to let muggleborn students attend Hogwarts (this should sound familiar, it's the same kind of thing Voldemort believed in). He was overruled by the other three, and chose to leave the school. According to legend, before he left he built a secret chamber somewhere in Hogwarts and put a monster in it. Supposedly, only Slytherin's heir can access the chamber and control the monster, thus cleansing the school of muggleborn students.

At first this sounded like just a myth, but two days ago a muggleborn student named Colin Creevey was attacked and petrified in the halls. It happened right after a Quidditch match, and a Gryffindor girl named Katie Bell was in the hospital wing when they brought him in. She overheard Professor Dumbledore say that it meant that the chamber had definitely been opened AGAIN, implying that it had been opened before. Now it makes sense that the teachers were all worried after the cat got petrified.

I know that once you hear this, your first reaction is going to be to come get me, but I need you to trust me on this. If there really is a monster in Hogwarts, it's only petrifying people, not killing them. Even in the magical world, there aren't that many creatures that can petrify people at will, so it shouldn't take long before we know exactly what we're dealing with. My friends and I are already working on it, and with any luck we'll know by the time we leave for Christmas. I'll tell you everything we find out then.

Love,

Row

November 21

Dear Row

I understand that you want to solve the mystery of this chamber and its monster, but please, be careful. I'll admit that you know more about the magical world than I do at this point, but that doesn't mean you should go rushing to solve riddles that have gone unsolved for a thousand years, no matter how curious you are. Salazar Slytherin was undoubtedly a very powerful wizard, so if he did leave a secret chamber inside Hogwarts, it is guaranteed to be guarded by more than a simple locking charm. Remember, if at any point you think that you or your friends might be in danger, let me know immediately.

Regarding the Christmas holiday, Jack and I will meet you outside the station next to the taxi stand on the 17th, just in case they're looking for me again. Until then, be careful.

Love, Harry

Ancient riddles and dangerous monsters? You get to have all the fun. I've always said you were too curious for your own good, so if there's anybody that can solve this mystery it's you. Still, I must say I'm a little jealous that you've found yourself in a real Indiana Jones style

adventure, and you'd better have some good stories for me at Christmas!

I also want to talk to you about the possibility of Harry going to Hogwarts. I know he wants to, but there's just so many things that could go wrong that it makes him too scared to take the risk. Lately he seems to be thinking really hard about something and going to the regular library for information. I can only guess he's trying to come up with a safe way to find out more about himself and his magical family. Speaking of which, have you found out anything about your birth family? I know it can't be easy, thinking that you might have an entire family out there somewhere, but no matter what, you'll always have us. Remember that.

We're really looking forward to seeing you at Christmas.

Love,

Jack

December 10

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts

"Come in, Severus"

"I'd appreciate if we could make this quick, headmaster," said Snape as he strode into the room. "I'm a busy man."

"Of course, Severus. You do remind of that fact quite often, I believe." replied Dumbledore lightly. "Seeing as how it is almost time for the Christmas Holiday, I thought we might discuss the information I received from muggle affairs regarding Miss Thomas."

Snape's eyes narrowed. "And why would such information interest me?"

“Because it appears that she was not entirely truthful with you earlier this year,” said Dumbledore carefully. “Her father is not dead, and she has only one brother, a Jack Thomas, your nephew. What’s more, it appears that their father actually lives in Surrey, not in London.”

“They ran away?” Snape asked, surprised.

“It would appear so,” the headmaster replied. “Although it would also appear that the father is in no hurry to get them back, as he has made no attempt to find them.”

“Who was the other boy then, she said they were both her brothers.”

“I do not know, Severus,” Dumbledore replied. “This is the limit of my information. If you wish to know more, I would suggest talking to Miss Thomas directly.”

Snape seemed to waver for a moment, before regaining his usual sneer.

“That will not be necessary, headmaster. Will you be speaking with her regarding her living arrangement?”

“No Severus,” Dumbledore sighed heavily. “It is not my business to interfere in the life of Miss Thomas. I only give you the option in the hope that you will take a more active interest in her life, and that of your nephew.”

Snape scowled. “If that is all, then?” Dumbledore nodded sadly and Snape walked to the exit, carefully considering what to do with this new information.

King’s Cross Station, December 17

“What time is it?”

“Five minutes since the last time you asked, Jack,” replied Harry evenly.

"Yeah, well, I thought she'd be here by now," Jack grumbled. He opened his mouth to say something else, but was interrupted by a loud squeal as a pair of small arms engulfed him in a hug.

"Oh, I missed you two terribly," squeaked Row as she gave Harry the same treatment.

"We missed you too, sis," Jack chuckled. Harry gave her a small smile. "So, ready to head home?"

Row's smile widened. "You bet."

The taxi ride home passed quickly, with the trio exchanging mostly small talk. Once or twice Row would start to talk about Hogwarts, only to be silenced by Harry.

"We'd best wait until we're alone to talk in detail," he told her quietly.

Finally they had reached their destination. Harry paid the driver while Jack grabbed Row's trunk from the boot and followed her inside.

"Home sweet home," said Row as she entered the flat. "I love Hogwarts, but it's definitely good to be back."

Harry smiled. "It's definitely not the same without you," he said, taking a seat on the sofa. "Alright, now that we're alone let's all have a seat. We've got a lot to talk about."

A/N Ok, there we go. What'd you guys think of the letters format? I needed a way to show things at both ends, and figured it was best (especially since we basically already know what happens). Next chapter is Christmas, Row tells what she knows of the Chamber, and Harry makes some plans.

“Wait, there was another attack?”

Row looked at her brother and nodded grimly. “Yeah, another muggleborn student named Justin Finch-Fletchley.”

“When?” Asked Harry quietly.

“About a week and a half ago,” replied Row. “Same as the first one, he was found petrified in the hallway with one of the school ghosts.”

“Ghosts?” Asked Jack, bewildered.

“Yeah, no one knew that ghosts could be petrified, but apparently they can. Anyway, it’s not that big a deal since he’ll be fine in a month or so-”

“Stop it Row,” interrupted Harry. “I know what you’re doing.”

“What’s she doing?” Asked a confused Jack.

“She’s afraid we’re not going to let her go back,” replied Harry. “That’s why she’s trying to downplay the attacks. Am I right?” Row nodded glumly. “So that’s a total of 3 attacks so far,” Harry muttered. “And they’re getting more frequent.”

“Ok, I know it’s serious,” said Row. “But I really like being at Hogwarts. It doesn’t even really feel like school, you know? It just feels right, somehow, and if I leave now I might never go back.”

Harry gave her a small smile. “Relax, Row. We’re not talking about pulling you out of school.” Row visibly relaxed. “However, I am wondering what is being done about all this.”

“We were thinking the same thing,” replied Row. “Hermione thinks that if the professors don’t do something soon, the school might be closed.”

“What about Dumbledore?” Asked Jack. “Isn’t he supposed to be the most powerful wizard in the world? Why can’t he do something?”

“Mostly because pretty much everything we know about the chamber is rumor,” Row replied thoughtfully. “Nobody is really sure what’s true and what isn’t, even Dumbledore.”

“Still,” said Jack, looking unconvinced. “You’d think that he’d at least have some idea, wouldn’t you? You said that this same thing had happened before, right?”

“Actually, it wasn’t the same,” Row replied. “Apparently, the last time the chamber was opened there was only one attack, and the girl died.”

“Died?” Jack gulped.

Row nodded. “Actually, Padma said that gave her an idea, but she needed to do more research, and would tell us after the holidays.”

“Well, whatever it is, don’t go looking for it,” said a concerned Jack.

“Of course, Jack.” Row just rolled her eyes before turning to Harry. “So, what’s new around here?” She said, obviously trying to change the subject. “Did you get through all those books?”

Jack snorted. “He better have; practically all he does is read. Speaking of which, where did you go last week? You said you’d tell me when Row got here.”

Harry sighed. “Well, I came up with an idea that would allow us a little more freedom, so I’ve been making sure that it was viable. Actually, I’ve learned a lot from the books I bought,” he said, turning to Row, “but for the last couple weeks I’ve been looking into emancipation.”

“You mean...?” Asked Jack, wide-eyed.

“I paid a visit to your father.”

“YOU WHAT!” Screamed Jack and Row together.

“I paid a visit to your father,” Harry replied calmly, ignoring their outburst. “I convinced him it was in his best interest to file

emancipation claims for both of you. I had a similar meeting with my aunt."

"How could you go without me?" Asked Jack desperately.

"I know this isn't what you want to hear, Jack," said Harry carefully, "but it wouldn't have done any good. You told me yourself that if you had your way, you'd never have to see him again. Hopefully, now you don't."

"It's not just about that, Harry," Jack continued angrily. "I don't need you always looking out for me. I can take care of myself, you know."

"I know, Jack," Harry nodded slowly. "But the fact remains that I was the best person to do this, and if everything goes through, you can be yourself again."

"How did you do it Harry?" Asked a concerned Row.

"The last time I was in Diagon Alley, I picked up this book on mind magic. Actually, I found out that the mind reading trick and I do is actually called leglimency, and it can be used for alot more. It's based on eye contact, so I'd recommend trying to avoid looking your professors in the eye, Row. One of them might have the same ability." Harry paused for a moment before continuing. "There was a lot of information in the book, and one of the things it mentioned was a mind control spell that was based on leglimency."

"Mind control?" Asked Row, horrified. "Oh Harry, are you talking about the Imperious curse? Please tell me you didn't use it!"

"Calm down, Row, it wasn't the Imperious curse," Harry assured her. "I know about that curse also, and although it's also a type of mind control, it's a completely different spell. What I used was an advanced form of leglimency called compulsion; basically I just convinced them that they really wanted to do what I told them to. Actually, if I tried to make someone do something that they were really strongly opposed to, it would make them resist more and break the spell, so it can't be used to completely control someone, unlike the imperious curse. It

worked quite well on both your father and my aunt, though," he finished with a small grin.

Row visibly relaxed until a sudden thought struck her. "Hang on, how'd you learn how to do that? You didn't just try it for the first time on your aunt did you?"

"Well, no," Harry fidgeted uncomfortably. "I've been practicing for almost two months now."

"But how?" Pressed Row.

"On random people, mostly," Harry admitted. "At the library, at the dojo, walking on the street. Any time I can make eye contact I've been practicing my leglimency. Never for anything bad!" He hastily explained, seeing the expression on Row's face. "The most I ever did was make master Choi pick Jack as a volunteer five straight times in class once."

"THAT WAS YOU!" Jack exploded.

Harry grinned sheepishly. "Yeah, that was when I knew I could do it. Sorry."

Jack was not mollified, and voiced his displeasure in rather colorful language.

"I don't think that's possible for a vertebrate, Jack," put in an amused Row before turning back to Harry. "Back to the real topic, when will we know the results?"

"As near as I can tell, we'll have to see a judge sometime in the next year," answered Harry. "I hired a solicitor, and he suggested that it would be best to wait until Jack's birthday before we actually have that meeting, so we've got almost 6 months. Basically we have to demonstrate some type of guardian neglect, which is easy since I convinced our guardians to admit to it. Then-"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Jack. "You mean they're going to confess to everything?"

"Unfortunately, not everything," Harry sighed. "If they admitted everything, they'd probably be arrested, and I don't think I'd be able to make them do that with leglimency; they'd resist too much. Basically they're going to admit that they've never really treated us well, they don't want us, and we'd be better off on our own. From there, we have to demonstrate that we can take care of ourselves, but with the money in the vault I don't think that will be a problem. I've already moved most of it into a normal bank account."

"And we've been doing fine by ourselves for some time already," said Row, thinking out loud.

"Exactly," agreed Harry. "The fact that we've been out on our own already is evidence of neglect since they never filed any type of missing persons report. We've been doing fine and continuing our schooling, basically doing everything that we're supposed to. Plus, if anyone gives us a hard time, I should be able to use leglimency to push them to agree."

"I'm not sure how I feel about that, Harry," Row frowned. "I mean, you can't just go around forcing everybody to agree with you."

"I know Row," Harry replied softly. "But if you think about it, this is really important for us, especially if we're ever found out. Once we're emancipated, it doesn't matter who finds us; nobody can force us to move. You know I only use magic when it's absolutely necessary."

Row looked like she was about to argue, but finally relented and nodded.

"So if all this comes through, then what?" Asked Jack.

"Well, we'll have adult rights so we won't have to hide anymore," answered Harry. "At least in the regular world. I've been talking to the goblins at Gringotts, and they've been really helpful with financial advice. Unfortunately, even if we're emancipated as muggles, we're still children in the wizarding world."

"How is that possible?"

Harry shrugged. "I asked my goblin advisor what he could tell me about wizarding emancipation, but he gave me the same 'we don't interfere' line that he gave me before. Basically, if it doesn't deal directly with your money, they won't talk to you about it. Still, they've been really helpful with the financial stuff, even set up a regular bank account for us."

"So they still won't tell you if your parents had a will?" Asked Row.

"No, all they'll say is that if my parents did have a will, they've never seen it."

"I read a little bit about that," interjected Row. "Most wizarding families appoint an executor for their will. The will itself is spelled so that only certain people can touch it unless given permission, and the executor is responsible for carrying out the wishes of the deceased. There's actually a lot of magic that goes into a proper will to safeguard against it falling in to the wrong hands, so if your parents had a will, their executor probably still has it." Row paused before adding, "of course, it's possible that your parents didn't have time to make a will...." She trailed off sadly.

"What does this mean for Row and Hogwarts?" Asked Jack, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

"The most likely scenario is that you'll be appointed as her guardian, Jack," Harry replied. "Progress reports, permission slips, and anything else will go straight to you. It's also possible that she'll be emancipated without a guardian, but seeing as how she's your sister, it's more likely that you'll be responsible for her." Jack nodded like he'd expected this. "As for me, I told my aunt to push for me to be declared an emancipated minor, same as you. If the judge thinks I'm still too young, then you'll probably be my guardian too. All this will be covered when we talk to the judge."

The group lapsed into silence again which was broken when Row gave a rather spectacular yawn.

"Well, looks like somebody's ready for bed," laughed Jack. "Go ahead, we have the entire holiday to sort this all out."

Row smiled and gave both Jack and Harry a quick hug before retiring. When she had gone, Jack turned to Harry with a serious expression on his face.

"Harry, why didn't you tell me you were going to see my father?" He asked quietly.

"What would you have done, Jack?" Harry replied just as softly.

"Dammit, Harry," Jack muttered forcefully, "when you told me what you did to the Dursleys, I didn't judge because I knew you needed revenge. Didn't you think that maybe I did too?"

Harry shook his head slowly. "What I did wasn't about revenge, Jack. I didn't do it because I was angry, or because I would enjoy it. I did it because it was the only way I could get on with my life." He paused before fixing Jack with a steely gaze. "Do you know that I still have nightmares about my uncle showing up and hurting you and Row? I know it's completely irrational because he's dead, but I'll never be completely rid of that vision. I had to punish the Dursleys; I had to bring them to justice if I was ever going to get on with my life. I didn't do what I did because of the past; I did it so that I could have a future."

"So you're telling me it had nothing to do with revenge, then," asked Jack skeptically.

Harry sighed. "I'm not perfect Jack. What I did was cruel and malicious, so I'm not going to lie and say that none of it was revenge. What I can say is that it wasn't revenge that drove me to return. It may have driven me to be more vindictive than I would have been otherwise, but it wasn't the reason I went back." Harry sighed again and leaned back in his chair. "Do you remember when I asked you what you would do if you saw your father on the street?" Jack nodded. "You said that if he didn't see you, you'd avoid him, and that you hoped you never had to see him again. When you said that, I knew

that you'd moved on; you didn't need what I did, and that's a good thing. It doesn't make you less of a man, Jack."

Jack slumped back into the sofa. "Yeah, I know all that," he sighed. "I just don't feel right having you out there fighting my battles, you know?"

"I understand," Harry agreed. "But it was the quickest way, and the only way that he was guaranteed to do what we wanted."

"I know," Jack sighed. "Just promise me that you won't make this a habit."

Harry nodded solemnly.

"I promise."

Harry awoke early the next morning and fixed breakfast for the three of them. Jack and Row joined him a short time later and Row was reminded of just how good a cook Harry was.

Harry was the first to finish, so he excused himself and put his blindfold on as he made his way over to the area he and Jack had set up for training. Row watched him leave and got her first look at the new training area, causing her to give a low whistle of appreciation.

One of the first things Harry had done upon returning from Diagon Alley was to look up any spells that he could use to improve their home. As a result, what was once a very modest flat had become much more comfortable, and now sported an interior that was several times larger than it had been originally. This had enabled Harry to block off a corner of what was once the living room and set it up with targets and training dummies for him to practice on.

Harry entered the training area and began his warm up exercises while he waited for Jack.

"Hey sis," whispered Jack as he got up from the table. "Watch this."

Row watched as Jack silently picked up the 3 spoons that were left over from breakfast and crept slowly forward. When he was within 10 feet of the entrance to the training area, he lobbed the first spoon high in the air and then threw the other two as hard as he could at the unsuspecting Harry. Moving quickly, Jack ran into the area, grabbed a wooden practice sword, and attacked.

The first two spoons Jack had thrown hit Harry's position at the same time, but he was no longer there. Row watched, slack jawed, as Harry immediately spun to the side to avoid the projectiles, summoning a sword from the rack as he did so. Ducking to avoid the third spoon, Harry extended his right hand to catch the incoming sword and swung it diagonally across his body, meeting Jack's blade with a loud CRACK.

Completely unsurprised, Jack began to attack Harry in earnest. Using their locked blades for leverage, he pushed back and tried a sweeping kick at Harry's legs. Harry sidestepped the kick and leveled a slash at Jack's midsection, which Jack blocked with his own blade. Harry quickly closed the distance between them and tried to grab Jack in an arm lock, but Jack was immediately jumped backwards and regained a defensive position.

The duel continued for another 30 seconds, until Harry was a split second late countering one of Jack's sword strikes and was pushed off balance. Jack immediately seized the opportunity and sent him to the mat with a sweep kick.

Harry groaned and removed his blindfold as he grasped Jack's extended hand.

"How did you know I was coming in with the sword?" Jack asked as he pulled Harry to his feet.

"I heard the wood scrape against the rack when you grabbed it," Harry replied. "Somehow my first instinct was to summon a sword as soon as I heard it, I guess subconsciously I just knew."

"Well, you're certainly getting better at the whole 'no sight' thing." Jack said, grinning. "What'd you think, Row?"

"Ohmygod, that was amazing!" Row blurted out. "How did you do it? And so fast? And just...WOW!"

"That's our Row," Jack chuckled. "It's good so see you haven't changed much."

"Oh, shut up, you," Row mock-grumbled. "Seriously though, how long have you been training blindfolded like that?"

"Almost three months now," put in Harry. "At first I was pretty bad, but getting beaten up consistently can be a pretty good motivator to improve. I'm still too slow in a real fight, though."

"Too slow?" Jack snorted. "You have better reactions with a blindfold on than most of the class does without one. I think you're doing fine."

Harry shrugged. "There's always room for improvement. The advanced class still kicks my ass even without the blindfold."

"So, do you guys do this everyday?" Asked Row.

"Pretty much," Jack replied. "We try to practice at least twice on days that we don't see Master Choi, and once in the morning otherwise. Once you get used to it, it's actually pretty fun."

"Well, they'll be no more training today," said Row firmly. "Today is strictly for Christmas shopping, and I want to go to Diagon Alley before the really big rush hits."

"Yes ma'am!" Jack saluted smartly, earning him a punch on the arm.

"That could work perfectly," said Harry thoughtfully, "I need to see the goblins sometime in the next week anyway, so might as well be today."

"It's settled then," said Row, before scowling at her brother. "And I'd better not get prank materials as my present, Jack Thomas!"

Jack just grinned.

The next week passed quickly for the trio. Between his usual training, studying, and spending holiday time with Row, Harry found himself with no free time to think about Hogwarts or the Chamber of Secrets, which suited Row just fine. Christmas was an intimate affair for the small family, as they traditionally had no one outside of themselves to exchange gifts with.

It therefore came as a surprise when 3 large owls swooped in the flat on Christmas morning carrying packages for Row.

“What’s all this then?” Asked Jack suspiciously.

“They’re from my friends at Hogwarts,” Row said as she checked the tags. “This one’s from Hermione, probably books,” she said as she lifted a package. “These are from Sarah and Padma.”

Jack was still looking bewildered. “Did you get them presents?”

“Of course I did, silly,” Row rolled her eyes. “You did tell me to make friends, remember?”

“Sure,” Jack snorted. “And of course you always listen to me...” Even Harry cracked a smile at that.

Opening her new presents, Row found that Hermione had indeed sent her a book, as had Padma. Sarah had sent her a collection of wizard candy that Jack immediately became interested in.

Jack himself had received a collection of wizarding prank items from Row and a special training outfit from Harry. The training gear had been specially charmed to reduce the damage he would take from direct hits and was guaranteed never to be ripped or torn. In his usual style, Jack had given both his siblings gift certificates to the bookstore in Diagon Alley.

Harry and Row had also given each other books; Harry's was a newly published Defense Against the Dark Arts book that was dedicated to different ways of shielding yourself from attack, and Row's was an introductory guide to creating various magical items. As everyone began to pack up their gifts, Harry pulled out one last box from behind him.

"Ok, I have one more present for everyone," he said as he opened the box. He withdrew three small notepads and tossed one each to Jack and Row.

"Ok, I know this isn't just an ordinary notepad," said Jack as he examined the gift.

Harry grinned. "You're right about that. All three of these are connected magically, so anytime Row wants to talk to us, all she has to do is use it."

Row's eyes lit up. "Really?" She squeaked. "Oh, Harry, that's perfect! But, where did you get them, they must have cost a fortune!"

Harry shook his head. "Actually, they weren't that expensive. It's a modified protean charm, which isn't that hard for an adult wizard. I was actually going to try making them myself, but it was complicated enough that I decided to just buy them."

"So they work instantaneously?" Asked Jack.

"Yeah," Harry replied. "Everything that's written in any of these automatically gets written in the other two. If there's a new message for you, the pad will grow hot and vibrate a little. Oh, but you have to be careful about using it, Row," Harry eyed her carefully. "They're banned at Hogwarts because students have been known to use them to cheat. You'll have to use it in secret unless it's an emergency."

"I can do that," Row nodded. "This is a great idea, Harry, especially since I can't phone from Hogwarts."

"That's what gave me the idea, actually," said Harry as he magically cleaned up the living room. "This way if there's a problem, we'll know

immediately instead of having to wait for an owl. One more thing though: I couldn't charm this like I could the parchment that we use the letters for, so you have to be careful what you say."

Row nodded thoughtfully and set the notepad aside while Jack took his presents to his room.

"You know, Harry," said Row thoughtfully. "You never did tell me how you were coming on all the other books that you bought."

"I'm actually done with most of them," Harry replied. "I think I told you in a letter that charms came really easy for me, so I went through all The Standard Book of Spells volumes pretty fast. I got through my beginning Transfiguration book too, but the intermediate one is really hard. I don't know if it's just more difficult or what, but I got stuck about half way through."

"Really?" Asked Row, interested. "They don't seem that different to me."

"Well, they're very different to me," muttered Harry. "I have to concentrate almost exclusively to transfigure something, but I can cast all sorts of charms simultaneously." Two of the living room chairs suddenly lifted into the air and began dancing around the room. "See? That's two separate objects and a mix of summoning, banishing, and levitation charms." Harry waved his hands and two balls of bright light joined in the dance. "I can keep all this going and still talk to you." He returned the room to its normal state. "But if I try to transfigure that chair into a pig, say, it takes almost a full 10 seconds of complete concentration, and most of the time I still don't get it right."

"Maybe it's just because transfiguration is new for you?" Suggested Row.

"I don't think so," Harry shook his head. "It feels different, I just don't know how."

Row shrugged. "What about Defense Against the Dark Arts?"

Harry's brow furrowed. "That's another problem. I think I'm doing the curses right, but without someone to practice on I can't be sure. Shield charms too, I can see that the shield looks right, but until somebody fires a spell at it I'll never know." Harry paused for a moment. "There's something else, too. Sometimes when I'm trying a new spell from a book, I think of ways it could be better, and it ends up doing what I thought it should instead what I got out of the book. The problem is, I'm never quite sure if what I'm doing is the same spell, a different spell, or something completely different. Like with those charms; when I'm doing them, I don't think banish, ok now summon, now levitate. I just move it where I want it, when I want to. There's nothing like that in any of the books I've read."

"Sounds frustrating."

"It can be," Harry nodded. "But that's why I've been focusing on mind magic lately. Some of the spells I've come across are really dangerous; there is one that can completely erase your memories."

"A memory charm, right?" Asked Row. "They give them to muggles when they don't want them to remember that they saw something magic."

"Right," Harry agreed. "But just think about all the ramifications of being to erase somebody's memory. You could do anything to them, take anything from them, basically you could do whatever you want and they would never remember." Row paled. "That's another reason I've been concentrating on mind magic; if I have a strong enough mental defense, memory charms won't work. There's a technique called occlumency, which is basically the opposite of leglimency, so I've already studied it a little. It helps strengthen your mind against all kinds of attacks and it's very similar to meditation." He paused. "I'm rambling, aren't I?"

"A little," Row grinned. "It's good though, I haven't seen you really excited about something like this for a long time." She gave him a thoughtful look. "You really should think about coming to Hogwarts, Harry. Magic is a part of you, and you obviously enjoy learning about it. You just might find the answers you're looking for."

“Maybe,” said Harry noncommittally. “Of course, I could also end up getting memory charmed and taken away to live somewhere else.” He gave her a meaningful look. “You only get one chance in something like this, Row.”

Row sighed and the two lapsed into silence until Jack came back into the room and turned on the television. Jack and Row immediately engaged in an argument over which Christmas movies were best while Harry sat back and watched, thinking about where the next year would take his small family.

The rest of the holiday passed quickly for the three siblings. Jack and Harry kept up their martial arts training, and Harry continued to walk around the house blindfolded, much to Row’s amusement. Row and Harry set aside time each day to talk in general about doing magic and how spells differed between disciplines. Even though Harry was far ahead of her in using spells, he still couldn’t help but be impressed at the knowledge Row had acquired in such a short time at Hogwarts.

Row continued to exchange owls with her friends, and spent time visiting both Sarah and Hermione to do what Jack dubbed “girly things.” Sarah had invited her entire family, but Harry thought it unwise for him and Jack to go since it would only invite unwanted questions about their parents and living situation.

Still, despite the restrictions, Row thought it was perhaps the best Christmas ever, and said so as her brothers dropped her off at King’s Cross Station.

“Well, I do try,” Jack replied with a smile.

“It’s not the same without you, Row,” said Harry honestly. “Remember the notepad messenger if you need anything.”

“I will,” Row said as they exchanged hugs. “And Harry?” Harry looked up. “Thanks.” With that she made her way inside the station.

A/N There we go, another chapter. Thanks again for all the suggestions people made. Next chapter we get back to some action, and maybe even a few surprises. Thanks for reading!

Harry spent the entire first month after Row returned to Hogwarts constantly checking his messenger for an emergency. After another two weeks with only normal letters back and forth, he began to think that maybe the Chamber of Secrets mystery was blown a little out of proportion.

This continued through March and April. In every letter, Row commented that there hadn't been any new attacks, and that the students were finally beginning to feel safe again. Classes continued as normal, and for a short time it appeared that the Chamber of Secrets mystery had simply gone away. Harry noticed that Row had neglected to mention if she and her friends had made any progress on solving the riddle, but as long as there were no more attacks, he decided to leave it alone.

Although he was still concerned, Harry forced himself to consider the possibility that the whole incident sounded a lot worse than it was. He trusted Row to tell him the truth if something really did go wrong, so he threw himself back into his normal routine. The emancipation proceedings were also coming along nicely, and by the end of April, the trio had scheduled a hearing with a judge in mid-June to discuss their options.

When May arrived and still he heard nothing sinister from Hogwarts, Harry was ready to admit that the crisis was over and that he'd overreacted, and said as much to Jack as they walked home from the dojo one evening.

"Well, well, well," said Jack smugly. "I never thought I'd see the day. Maybe now you can loosen up and have some fun with me and Christy."

Christy was Jack's new girlfriend, and a constant source of annoyance for Harry. Jack had always favored looks over substance, and Christy was no different. With long blond hair and a sleek, toned body, she was everything Jack looked for in a girl.

As expected, Harry hated her.

She was the quintessential popular girl; the same type of girl that had helped Harry's cousin make his life miserable in primary school. She was pretty and she knew it, and she used it as an excuse to treat everyone beneath her like dirt. On top of all this, she treated Harry like he was 4 years old, often telling Jack he was so brave to take care of the "helpless little boy."

Harry hated being called helpless.

"I'll never have anything with Christy," Harry snapped. "I told you to keep her away from me."

"Woa, mate," said Jack, holding up his hands. "I was kidding, alright?"

"Sorry," Harry sighed. "But I really don't like her; the only reason I don't throw her out is because you do. I really don't know what you see her besides looks."

"There's more?" Asked Jack with fake astonishment. "Seriously though, I like her, and if you got to know her a little better, you'd like her too."

"I seriously doubt it," Harry snorted. "Besides, I-"

He abruptly stopped when he felt the messenger in his pocket being to vibrate. Quickly he pulled it out and read the message as Jack did the same.

It's back. Hermione was attacked and petrified today. We know what the monster is, but still don't know where the chamber is, and we don't know how to stop it. I'm scared and I don't know what to do.

Harry immediately pulled a pen out of his pocket and scribbled his reply.

Row,

Stay calm, I'm coming.

-H

"Now what?" Asked Jack when he saw Harry's message.

"I'm going to Hogwarts immediately," Harry replied as he quickened his pace back to their flat. "I don't care if I have to stay invisible the whole time; I'm not letting whatever this thing is get her."

"I'm coming with you," said Jack resolutely.

"Not unless you learned how to apparate, you're not," replied Harry just as surely. "I'm apparating directly to Hogsmede and walking to Hogwarts. There's no time to discuss this Jack. If you have something to say, use the messenger."

Jack scowled but remained silent as they entered their flat and Harry packed a small bag. Finished, he turned back to Jack.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, before staying more strongly, "I'll keep her safe." With that, he disappeared.

It was well into evening when Harry reappeared on the side of High Street in Hogsmede. Ducking behind the nearest building, he made himself invisible and then set a brisk pace for Hogwarts.

As he passed the winged boars that marked the entrance to Hogwarts grounds, Harry felt an oppressive energy settle on him.

Must be the anti-apparition wards, he thought to himself. He attempted to apparate anyway and found that he couldn't. That will make things more difficult, but there's nothing I can do about it now. Shrugging, he continued through the gates.

As he neared the large castle, Harry removed the messenger from his pocket and scribbled a note to Row asking her to meet him. Knowing that she wouldn't be able to respond until she was alone, he settled in to wait.

A short time later, Row came into the entryway. Harry moved up next to her and tapped her on the shoulder.

"I'm right here, Row," he said as he made her invisible and led her over to a corner. Sitting down, he put a silencing charm. "Ok, I've put a silencing charm around us. Now, tell me everything."

"I don't know where to start," Row sniffed. "I thought it was over!"

"Just be calm and start at the beginning," said Harry soothingly.

"Ok," Row gathered herself and began. "Well, when we got back to school Padma said that she'd been trying to work out why everybody had been petrified, but not killed. So we all got together and went over the list of attacks and everything we knew, and we looked to see what creatures could both petrify and kill based on circumstances. Sarah had the idea to document the detail of every attack scene and talk to witnesses, so Hermione and I—"

"Row," interrupted Harry softly. "Calm down. What did you actually find out?"

"It's a basilisk," Row cried. "A giant snake that kills anything that looks it in the eye, but everybody that was petrified saw it either as a reflection or through something else. It was Hermione who finally figured it out, and then it got her!" Row was crying now. "She was carrying a mirror with her to look around corners and must have run right into it."

"It's ok Row," said Harry as he hugged her invisible form. "How do you kill a basilisk?"

"The book said that a rooster's cry will kill it, but whoever is opening the chamber killed all the rooster's on Hogwarts grounds."

"And you have no idea where it lives?"

"None," Row said glumly. "We think it has to be underground somewhere, but we don't know where. They arrested Hagrid today, too! Sent him to Azkaban, the wizard prison."

"The gamekeeper?" Asked a bewildered Harry. "Dumbledore let them arrest him just like that?"

"Dumbledore's gone too!" Row screeched hysterically. "The school governors removed him earlier today. It's like they're taking people away one by one and leaving us all to die!"

"Shhh, it's ok, I'm here," Harry said as he tried to comfort his now hysterical sister. "Come on, let's get you inside. I'll be right next to you the whole time." Row nodded as Harry made her visible again and took down his silencing charm. They walked slowly into the castle and made their way to Ravenclaw tower.

--KILL.....YES.....--

"Did you hear that?" Asked Harry as he grabbed Row's arm.

"Hear what?" Asked Row, confused.

--...BLOOD.....KIIILLLL.....--

"That! It's moving this way!" Harry pulled Row up the stairs at a run.

"What the-, Harry! I don't hear anything," yelled Row as they ran.

"I hear a voice talking about killing, and it's just ahead of us," Harry responded as he quickened his pace, finally bursting into the second floor girl's bathroom. He paused, listening intently for any sign of the voice.

"Harry," huffed Row, "This is the girl's bathroom."

"I heard something come this way, Row," said Harry, annoyed. "It could have been the basilisk; it was talking about killing."

"Basilisks don't talk, they're snakes," said Row, "Only a parseltongue like Salazar Slytherin can..." she halted abruptly before looking at Harry with wide eyes.

"Can what?"

"Can talk to snakes," finished Row slowly. "Have you ever talked to a snake?"

"Not that I can remember," said Harry thoughtfully. "Of course, I've never actually tried...."

"Harry, I'm going to conjure a harmless snake, ok? Make yourself visible and don't attack it." Harry looked bemused but complied.

"Serpensortia," Row jabbed her wand forward and a small snake jumped out of it.

--Where am I?-- Hissed the Snake.

Harry's eyes widened in astonishment.

"Can you understand it, Harry?" Asked Row eagerly. Harry nodded. "Try to say something back!"

"Eh, hello?" Said Harry cautiously.

"No, no," Row shook her head vigorously. "Try to talk to the snake, really try. You should be able to talk in snake language."

Harry furrowed his brow and looked intently at the snake in front of him.

--Hello?-- he hissed.

The snake's head snapped up to look at Harry.

--You speak?--

--Apparently I do.-- Harry hissed back. --Do many people talk to you?--

-

--You are the first-- the snake replied.

“He says I’m the first person he’s ever talked to,” Harry told Row, who was watching the hissing exchange, fascinated. She shook herself out of her daze and vanished the snake before turning to Harry.

“Wow, a parseltongue,” Row shook her head. “Is there anything you can’t do?”

Harry shrugged. “We’re getting off track. This means that I probably did hear the basilisk, right?”

“It would make sense,” said Row thoughtfully. “And if it led you in here-“

“This could be the entrance the chamber,” Harry finished for her. “You should tell your professors immediately.”

Row nodded and Harry made himself invisible again as the two walked towards the staff room. As they approached, they heard voices through the cracked door.

“...total tragedy!” A Scottish voice was saying. “The school will never be the same again.”

“What was the message that the heir of Slytherin left this time, Minerva?”

“The message said, ‘her skeleton will lie in the chamber forever.’”

“Do we know who was taken?” Asked a third voice.

“We do,” replied McGonagall sadly. “Ginny Weasley.” Row gasped as the professor continued. “I have already dispatched a letter to Albus, but I fear he will be too late. Even he does not know where the chamber lies.”

“Where is Gilderoy?” Squeaked a voice. “He did say he would deal with the monster, didn’t he?”

“Running away as fast as he can, no doubt,” replied another man snidely. “I have said from the beginning he was a fraud, and now we see the proof.”

“We will lose her then,” another woman said sadly. “And perhaps Hogwarts as well.”

Harry leaned in to get a look at the speakers but was pulled away from the door and down the hall by Row.

“Harry, we have to do something!” She whispered when they were out of earshot. “Ginny isn’t exactly a friend, but I do know her, and she’s the only girl in Gryffindor that doesn’t shun Hermione. We can’t just let her die!”

“We’re not doing anything,” Harry cut in sharply. “I don’t like the idea of leaving someone to die anymore than you do, but my first priority is to make sure you’re safe.”

“What if it was me then, Harry?” Row asked angrily. “It could have just as easily been me down there! What would you do then?”

“You know what I’d do, I’d get you out,” Harry responded immediately.

“This is no different, Harry!” Row practically screamed. “She’s going to die down there. I’m involved already and it’s too late to back out. We know where the entrance to the chamber is, and I’m going in, with or without you.”

For a brief moment Harry considered simply stunning her and taking her home, but then he thought about how he would feel if it actually was Row down there. He knew that he’d move heaven and earth to see her returned safely. But what of Ginny Weasley? He didn’t know her, but she was still an 11 year old girl who would die unless he did something.

We could tell the professors, Harry thought to himself, but dismissed the idea immediately. Telling the professors would bring a lot of questions that Harry didn’t want to answer, and he didn’t want to trust

them any more than he had to. What's more, telling them would seriously handicap his ability to deal with the situation if it got worse.

So either I go after her or I wait and see what happens, he thought with a frown. I risk my life against a monster or leave a girl to die. Leave an innocent 11 year old girl to die... He sighed.

"Ok, I'll get her out," Harry told his sister. "But only if you swear that you'll stay someplace safe. You help me find the entrance and then you wait elsewhere, understand?"

Row started to protest but Harry stopped her.

"Somebody has to stay outside in case things get ugly, and I'm the better fighter here. You. Will. Wait. For. Me. Agreed?" Row reluctantly agreed and the two ran back to the girl's bathroom and began to search.

"What are you doing in my bathroom?" Screeched a voice from behind them. "I thought I heard someone, were you in here earlier?"

Instinctively, Harry moved himself in front of Row and got into a defensive position before he realized that the speaker was a ghost, and that the ghost couldn't see him.

"We're looking for someone," Harry replied politely as he made himself visible. "Perhaps you can help us? I'm Harry, what's your name?"

If it were possible, Harry could have sworn the ghost was blushing.

"Myrtle," the ghost replied shyly. "Sorry about earlier, I didn't see you," she said, emphasizing the last word coyly.

"Well," Harry continued, "We're looking for a secret entrance to a chamber, and we think it's in your bathroom. Have you seen anyone in here recently?"

"Oh, you're looking for her," the ghost pouted. "She never even says hi to me, just walks over the sink, hissing."

"Who does?" Asked Row curiously as Harry examined the sink.

"I wasn't talking to you," replied Myrtle snidely. Row scowled at her.

Harry, meanwhile, was examining the sink when he found a small snake symbol engraved on one of the faucets.

"You said she hisses at the sink?" Harry asked, Myrtle nodded. "Well, here goes nothing," he muttered to himself before concentrating on the snake.

--Open-- He hissed.

Immediately the sink began to reform itself, revealing a large hole in the floor.

"What did you do," asked Row, gob smacked.

"That's what she does," said Myrtle suspiciously. "Then she hisses again and makes stairs appear."

"What else does she do, Myrtle?" Asked Harry.

"I don't really know," Myrtle responded, sounding hurt. "The only other time I saw her she caught me looking and cast some really nasty spells at me."

Harry seemed to consider this for a moment before turning back to the opening in front of him and concentrating.

"STAIRS." He said forcefully. He looked at Row. "Was that parseltongue?"

"Uh, no Harry, that was English," replied a confused Row.

Harry looked around until he found another snake figure near the opening. Looking at it intently, he tried again.

--STAIRS!-- This time the command came out as a violent hiss, and immediately stairs began to form, spiraling in a circular pattern down into the tunnel.

"Ok, remember the plan," Harry said as he mentally prepared himself for battle. "You get someplace safe and wait for me. When I'm done, or if something goes wrong, I'll use the messenger. If you don't hear anything for an hour, get your professors and tell them everything. Understand?"

Row nodded and rushed forward to engulf Harry in a hug. "Be careful." She whispered into his chest.

"Stay safe," Harry replied softly. "I'll be back soon." With that, he turned and began his descent into the tunnel.

Harry immediately conjured two balls of white light and sent them down ahead of him to light his way. He walked slowly but steadily, constantly alert for any sign that the basilisk was close. Finally, he reached the bottom of the tunnel and continued into a dark cavern. He scribbled a note to Row saying that he'd made it to the bottom of the stairs with no problems before continuing. After another short walk, he found his progress halted by a large door.

The door was decorated with what appeared to be several wrought iron snake sculptures. With his magical lights as the only illumination, Harry could have sworn that they were alive.

"Well, it worked once," Harry muttered to himself before concentrating on one of the snake sculptures.

--Open-- he hissed.

The snake sculptures immediately sprung into action; slithering around each other towards the side of the door. When the last one fell into place, there was a loud CLICK and the door began to swing open. The door opened to reveal a long hallway lined with 20 foot statues of various snakes, each pouring water from their open mouth like a fountain. The water ran the length of the hallway on either side of the stone path that lay in the middle, which was lit by the torches

that were fitted in between the statues. Overall, Harry had to admit it looked rather ominous. After another quick note to Row, he began walking silently down the hall.

After a while, Harry saw that the hallway eventually opened into a much larger room. Double-Checking that his invisibility was still active, Harry crept into the room.

Like the hallway, this room was also lit by wall torches, but unlike the hallway, it was enormous, built around a large stone statue of a man's face.

Salazar Slytherin, guessed Harry. This must be the Chamber of Secrets, but where is the basilisk?

Harry's gaze swept the room before landing on the prone form of a small red-haired girl. Careful not to rush, Harry crept over to her and felt for a pulse. It was there, but it was weak, and her skin was ice cold. Careful not to disturb her, Harry scanned the room for her attacker. At first he found nothing, but then a flicker in the shadows caught his eye.

Hiding in the shadows of the statue was a boy in Hogwarts robes who couldn't be older than 16 or 17 years old, looking at Ginny with a morbid grin on his face. As Harry watched, the boy seemed to become more substantial, only to flicker again to nearly transparent. Harry didn't know exactly what was going on, but he was willing to bet that this boy was behind it.

Carefully he crept up alongside the boy, noticing as he did so that he wore a badge with name "T.M. Riddle." When he was close enough, he dispelled his invisibility and fired a body bind and a disarming charm at point blank range. Both spells hit the young wizard and he seemed to shimmer for a moment with a shocked look on his face. Unperturbed, Harry fired two stunners directly into the boy's chest, sending him careening backwards into the statue but not knocking him out.

"Who dares attack Lord Voldemort!" Roared Riddle as he shakily regained his feet.

Harry's eyes widened incredulously before narrowing. "Intimidation won't work Riddle. What the hell are you, anyway?" It was only now that Harry realized that the boy in front of him didn't have a wand.

"Don't call me that!" Riddle roared. "I've denounced the name of my filthy muggle father and been reborn! I AM LORD VOLDEMORT!"

Harry, miffed at the boy's seeming invulnerability to magic, decided to change tactics and fired two maximum strength reductor curses at the statue above Riddle's head. The side of the statue exploded, raining stone down upon the unsuspecting wizard, who scrambled to get out of the way.

Pressing his advantage, Harry sent one of the larger stone blocks flying into Riddle's back, pinning him to the ground. He then carefully began to approach the boy to make sure that he had been incapacitated. He had taken only a few steps when he heard a sound that made his blood freeze.

"Harry?" Came a small voice from the chamber entrance.

Whirling around, Harry saw Row walking slowly into the chamber with wide eyes.

"ROW, GET OUT, NOW!" Harry yelled, but it was too late.

"You will face the wrath of the great Salazar Slytherin for this, boy," Riddle spat venomously before hissing, --Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts four--

Immediately the mouth of the statue began to open and Harry heard something gigantic moving around anxiously behind it. Thinking quickly, he began firing his most powerful reductor curses at the statue, reducing it to rubble before the mouth could open. He heard a giant screech and loud thrashing noises coming from the collapsed opening as he turned and ran back towards Row.

“ROW,” he yelled as he banished Ginny towards her. “TAKE GINNY AND GET OUT NOW!” Row nodded shakily as she levitated Ginny and started back towards the exit.

--KILL THEM YOU STUPID BEAST-- Hissed the trapped Riddle angrily. --IGNORE THE BOY, GET THE GIRL'S DIARY!--

Hearing this, Harry turned back to look at Ginny's body as Row levitated her out of the chamber, and noticed for the first time that she had a small leather book grasped firmly in her hands. With a thought he summoned it to him and put it in his back pocket as he closed his eyes, assuming the void and concentrating on his instincts.

With a loud cry, the basilisk finally broke through the remains of the stone statue, sending pieces everywhere and freeing Riddle as well. Spitting with fury, it leveled its gaze at Harry before whipping forward with jaws agape to swallow him whole.

Quick as lightning, Harry fired twin reductor curses into the monsters gaping maw, causing it to rear back and cry out in pain as three of its fangs were blown out the side of its mouth.

Still with his eyes closed, Harry focused all his energy and sent an enormous block of stone flying into the basilisk's side, throwing it against the wall with enough force to rock the entire chamber. He quickly followed with a series of reductor, blasting, and piercing curses, but they were all absorbed by the monster's hide. Changing tactics again, Harry began to banish as many stone blocks as he could towards the downed beast. The basilisk thrashed about on the ground as Harry tried to bury it, until, with a giant heave, it broke free and came at him again.

LEAVE BOY! GET THE BOOK! Hissed Riddle frantically. With an agonized cry, the injured basilisk turned from Harry and dove toward the tunnel.

“WAIT! I HAVE THE DIARY HERE!” Harry yelled as he held the book aloft, but the beast didn't slow. “DAMN!” Harry swore. He made to follow the beast into the tunnel, but was tackled from behind by Riddle as he grabbed for the diary.

Harry twisted his body and delivered a kick that sent Riddle flying off. Thinking that the only way to get Riddle off his back was to destroy the diary, he threw it to the ground and fired a severing charm at it. The spell sliced the cleanly book in two, and Harry was forced to cover his ears as the apparition of Tom Riddle let loose an unearthly scream and vanished from sight with a bright flash. Pocketing the remains of the diary, Harry ran full bore back towards the surface.

Right as Harry finally dispatched the young Tom Riddle, Row reached the stairs leading back to the girl's bathroom. Moving quickly, she and the still unconscious Ginny had slowly begun their climb when a loud roaring sound came from the tunnel behind them.

Row quickened their pace and had cleared the cavern opening when the basilisk came roaring out underneath her. The monster reared up to follow them, but was unable to fit its wide girth in between the spiral stairs. With a roar of fury, it lashed strongly into the bottom stairs, shaking the tunnel and sending Row sprawling onto the stair in front of her. The basilisk thrashed and rammed the staircase once more, but Row held fast and quickly continued her climb. With another angry screech, the basilisk turned and dove back into the cavern.

With a sigh of relief, Row turned to make sure Ginny was secure when she saw the young girl's eyes begin to open.

"Row Thomas?" Asked Ginny groggily. "What happened? Where are we? What-"

"Sorry, Ginny," Row cut her off. "No time, we're being chased. Can you walk?" Ginny nodded and Row removed her levitation spell. "Come on, we have to hurry."

The two girls continued their ascent, and reached the exit into the girl's bathroom quickly. One there, Row slumped against the wall in exhaustion, breathing heavily.

"We....have...to get...professors," she managed to puff out in between breaths. Shakily, she started to stand up when the ground beneath her gave a violent jerk.

"GINNY, RUN!" She yelled, but another violent blast sent Ginny to the ground as well. Regaining her feet, Row rushed over to Ginny only to be thrown across the room as the wall exploded and the basilisk thrust its head through with a triumphant cry.

Row hit the wall hard and felt something warm oozing down the side of her head as she fought a losing battle to stay conscious.

Sorry Harry, she thought sadly. I tried my best.

Briefly, she thought she registered a bright flash through her closed eyelids before darkness overtook her.

As he ran through the cavern that led back to the spiral stairs, Harry could hear the basilisk thrashing about far ahead of him.

I need to get back, he thought desperately. I need to get back and save them from that monster! NOW!

Harry focused every fiber of his being on the need to get back in time to save Row, willing himself to run faster than he ever had before. He asked his magic to do something, anything, to help him save his sister and her friend.

With a flash of flame, his prayer was answered as a brightly colored bird appeared in front of him and dropped a cloth bundle into his hands. Not breaking stride, Harry fumbled with the bundle until his hand closed over the hilt of sword. The bird gave out a short, beautiful trill and grasped his arm in its talons before Harry felt his world disappear in a flash of flame.

He reappeared into chaos. The entrance to the bathroom had been closed off by fallen debris, and the basilisk was hovering over the unconscious form of Ginny Weasley, obviously looking for the diary.

Harry immediately averted his gaze and banished two large stone blocks at the monster, sending it crashing into the wall. As he turned, his gaze landed on Row, lying on the ground with blood covering the right side of her face.

For a second, time stopped for Harry. Falling shakily to his knees, he reached out a trembling hand and felt for a pulse. Finding one, he cast the only healing charm he knew with all his power and summoned Ginny's body, placing it next to Row's and building a makeshift barrier of stone to protect them from any more collateral damage. That done, he grasped the sword he'd been given and turned to face the basilisk with fire in his veins.

Immediately, he sensed that the bird that had brought him here had not been idle, as the basilisk was now thrashing about wildly. Chancing a brief glance, Harry's suspicions were confirmed when he saw that both of the beast's eyes had been ripped out. He gave a grim smile as he prepared his attack.

The basilisk was far from defenseless, however, and struck out viciously with its tail. Harry dove to the side and swung the sword, only to have it knocked from his grasp and his shoulder torn from its socket. He summoned it back to him with a thought, simultaneously firing a reductor curse into the ground beneath the basilisk's head, sending a spray of stone and tile into its face. Just as Harry had hoped, the beast reared up and let out a loud roar of fury, leaving its mouth open and unprotected.

Levitating the sword, blade out, in front of him, Harry put all of his energy into one super concentrated banishing charm, and sent the sword flying into the basilisk's mouth at an incredible velocity. The sword flew straight between the monster's jaws, piercing the roof of its mouth and continuing through its brain. The force was so great that the sword continued to tear through the monster, eventually ripping out the top of its head and spraying the room with a thick film of blood and gore before finally coming to rest hilt-deep in the bathroom wall.

It was only now that the battle was over that Harry realized just how large the basilisk really was. He looked over the bloodied carcass in

front of him in awe for a moment before turning swiftly and examining the two unconscious girls. He was relieved to find that both of them had strong pulses, although both undoubtedly had serious injuries, it didn't appear that either was close to death. It was only then that Harry began to hear frantic voices on the other side of the debris blocking the door, followed by what was unmistakably the sound of blasting curses.

Exhausted both physically and magically, Harry sank to the floor to consider his options. He was sure that Hogwarts had its own medical team, but he had no idea where it was. Not to mention the fact that he was there in secret; a secret he would prefer to keep. There was a decent chance that he could get by with his illusion still in place, but it was still a chance he would rather not take.

Sighing heavily, he opened his eyes to find that the bright red bird from earlier was in front of him giving him a very sharp look.

"Can you get them to a healer?" He asked hesitantly. He felt ridiculous for talking to a bird, at least until the bird clearly nodded.

Harry watched in astonishment as the bird grasped the girls one by one and disappeared in a flash of flame. Harry decided to take the time to heal his own wounds, but found that he was too magically drained to do it properly, although he did manage to pop his shoulder back into place. With a grunt of pain, he got to his feet and prepared to leave when the bird reappeared.

The bird trilled and cocked its head to give Harry a stern look. It looked toward the sword embedded in the wall and then back to Harry, who finally caught on. Gathering himself for one more spell, he summoned the sword back to his hand, only to have it immediately disappear. He looked bemusedly at the bird, which seemed to bob up and down in approval before grasping him and once again vanishing in a sea of flames, just seconds before the Hogwarts professors succeeded in blasting their way into the bathroom.

Harry briefly caught himself thinking how different this feeling was from the jerk of apparition when he reappeared in what was obviously a hospital wing of some sort and saw that Row and Ginny were

already laid out on beds. Harry heard a noise coming from the nearby office, and tried to make himself invisible but was only half successful. He quickly ducked behind a dividing screen and tried again, this time succeeding. When he heard the healer return to her office, he slowly crept out and made his way to Row's bed.

Seeing her sleeping peacefully, he decided not to wake her and, after checking that she still had her messenger, he crept over to Ginny Weasley's bed and placed the remains of the diary in her front pockets. That done, he made his way stealthily out of the hospital wing. With an immense amount of effort, Harry eventually made it out of Hogwarts and back into Hogsmede. Walking into The Three Broomsticks, he didn't care that he'd only been able to remove half of his invisibility charm, and looked to all the world like a ghost requesting a room. Still, Madam Rosmerta's skepticism vanished quickly enough when he showed her the gold, and she was more than happy to rent him a room for the night. Looking like death warmed over, Harry stumbled up the stairs and into his room, passing out cold before he hit the sheets.

A/N Well, that's the first extended action sequence I've ever written, I hope you liked it. Props go out to anti-thule for figuring out exactly where I was going with the blindfold training.

You'll no doubt notice that I changed a couple of things like the stairs in the tunnel. I refuse to believe that Salazar Slytherin designed the chamber so that he had to slide down a dirty tube to get in. Another thing I refuse to believe is that moaning Myrtle would have no idea that the chamber was being opened, or who was doing it. It's HER bathroom, and I'm supposed to believe that in the 5 times Ginny Weasley opened the chamber, she didn't notice anything at all? Come on now.

Next chapter we have the (rather extensive) fallout from the chamber incident, including numerous questions for Row that she doesn't know the answer to, explanations of all kinds, some overdue revelations, and a tough decision for Harry. Thanks for reading!

Daniel Miller was bored.

It wasn't that he hated his job, quite the contrary in fact. Of course, being a squib doesn't exactly get one inundated with job offers, and working with muggle equipment for the ministry of magic did involve a certain amount of prestige. Anytime muggle affairs needed something done with a computer, they came to Daniel, and he had to admit he liked that. He had long ago accepted the fact he would never be promoted higher than he was, and that was ok; but it didn't help on bloody boring days like this.

Mechanically, he checked his inbox for anything that needed doing, and was surprised to find an alert message. He did a quick lookup for the file that the message referred to, and stared in shock at the name that came up.

Harry Potter

No longer bored, Miller sent an owl to his supervisor in muggle affairs and began to process the alert.

Hogwarts Staff Room, Hogwarts

"SILENCE!"

Albus Dumbledore's voice cut through the chaotic chattering like a knife as his fellow professors immediately took their seats looking abashed.

"Now, I know that we are all quite befuddled," Dumbledore continued, "but before we jump to conclusions, let us examine what we know." He flicked his wand and conjured a comfy recliner before sitting down and continuing. "Now, as near as anyone can tell, Ginny Weasley was captured earlier by the heir of Slytherin and taken into the Chamber of Secrets. Minerva contacted me as soon as she could, however it was doubtful that I would be able to arrive in time to render any assistance. I, of course, came as soon as I could and had just been filled in by Minerva when Mr. Filch reported a major disturbance

in the area of the second floor girl's bathroom. Upon hearing this, I sent out messenger charms to professors Snape and Flitwick telling them to meet me in the hallway. When we arrived, the entire wall containing the bathroom entrance lay in shambles, and we could hear a violent struggle taking place within."

"But Albus," broke in Professor Sprout, "Who could possibly-"

"My dear, if you could give me but a moment, I shall do my best to answer the rest of your questions," said Dumbledore politely before resuming his tale. "As I was saying, we could hear a struggle, but could not see inside. The other professors and I began blasting at the rubble in order to get through. As we began, the sounds coming from inside abruptly ceased. Fearing that we were already too late, we redoubled our efforts and finally forced our way into the bathroom to find a rather large dead basilisk and one petrified ghost by the name of Myrtle. The bathroom itself was nearly completely demolished, however we were also able to locate what appears to be a tunnel leading into the bowels of Hogwarts from the vicinity of the bathroom sink. I can only surmise that the basilisk was indeed the monster from the chamber of secrets, and that the tunnel was the entrance to that hidden chamber."

Dumbledore paused to take in the shocked faces of his fellow professors before he dropped his last bombshell.

"Indeed, I was surprised as most of you are now. I was even more surprised when I received a summons from Madame Pomfrey requesting my presence in the hospital wing. When I arrived, Miss Weasley was already being attended to by Madame Pomfrey, as was Miss Rowena Thomas. Judging by the injuries they sustained, it would appear that it was the two of them who fought and killed the basilisk, after which they were transported by Fawkes to the hospital, startling Madame Pomfrey quite a bit in the process." He chuckled at the mental image before spreading his hands to the room. "Now, I shall do my best to answer questions, but be warned, many of the answers are still beyond my grasp and will remain so until our young heroines have awakened."

“How in the world could two first year girl’s defeat such a monster!” Professor Sprout shouted at once. “And who was the heir of Slytherin? Was it a student?”

“I must admit to being rather curious about the actual battle myself,” replied Dumbledore, twinkling. “The basilisk’s eyes had been ripped out and something had pierced through the back of its head, killing it. It also had several other injuries that appeared to be from falling debris. As to how they did it, however, we shall simply have to wait and ask them. As for the heir of Slytherin, I have a suspicion, but it is only that. I fear that, too, will have to wait.”

“How is it that Fawkes went to their aid, headmaster?” Asked a very confused professor Sinistra. “If you did not send him, why did he go?”

Again Dumbledore chuckled. “I’m afraid that my phoenix friend is rather impulsive. It is a somewhat common trait among phoenixes, being immortal they tend to act what we would consider quite rashly. I can only guess that Fawkes, being tied to me and thus to the school, sensed that a student desperately needed his help. Beyond that, I know not.”

“If I could hazard a guess, headmaster,” cut in Snape silkily. “The markings around the beast’s eyes looked rather like scratches made by a bird’s talons. It could have been the phoenix that blinded the monster, thus enabling one of the young women to somehow dispatch it.”

“A keen observation, Severus,” said Dumbledore with a smile. “Whoever it was that called Fawkes to the rescue, we can be assured that they had only the purest of intentions, as he would not have gone otherwise.” Dumbledore looked at his fellow professors and was greeted by a mix of confusion and astonishment. “I believe it would be best for us to adjourn until we have a chance to talk with Miss Weasley and Miss Thomas.” He said, rising slowly to his feet. “Until then, I suggest that each of the heads of house apprise their students of recent events. Inform them that all end of term exams are to be cancelled; that should get you a warm welcome.”

With that, the professors filed out of the staff room to continue their duties around the school. When everyone had gone, Dumbledore carefully took out two pieces of a small diary and turned them over in his hands. Still deep in thought, he made his way to the hospital wing to talk to Poppy.

Harry awoke the next morning feeling like he'd been run over by a bus, picked up, and run over again. It seemed like even his blood hurt, and he groaned as he pulled himself out of bed and over to the bathroom for a morning shower.

After a nice long soak, he emerged feeling slightly better and determined to find out how Row was doing. He checked the messenger in his pocket and found a short message from Jack asking what was going on. With a curse, Harry realized that Jack hadn't heard from him since yesterday, and was probably extremely worried. Harry quickly wrote a short summary of what had happened, leaving out any specific details, and finished by saying that he was about to check on Row and then he would contact Jack again.

That finished, Harry reapplied his glamour, thanked a suspicious looking Madame Rosmerta, and made his way back up to Hogwarts, pausing along the way to make himself invisible.

As he entered the school, he was amazed at how much more activity there was than there had been the day before. Students were milling about everywhere, many talking in excited whispers about what had happened in the chamber.

"...killed it with her bare hands..."

"...200 feet long, and completely resistant to magic!"

"..just to save the Weasley girl. I didn't even know they were friends...."

To Harry's dismay, it seemed that the entire school already knew that Row had been involved with the fight in the Chamber of Secrets.

From the snippets of conversation he caught, the popular belief was that Row had single handedly charged into the chamber of secrets, rescued Ginny Weasley, and slain the basilisk. Harry felt a ball of ice settle in his stomach when he realized what this meant.

Everybody's going to want to know what happened, he thought. Especially the professors. And she's not going to have anything to tell them. I have to find her, NOW!

Still invisible, Harry quickened his pace towards the hospital wing. After two wrong turns, he eventually found his way there and, seeing the room empty of visitors, made his way over to Row's bed.

Row looked better, but she was still unconscious and very pale. Harry reached out and felt for her pulse, which was back to normal despite her somewhat weak appearance.

"Row," he whispered, shaking her gently. "Row, it's me, Harry."

Row seemed to shift slightly but offered no other response. Sighing in frustration, Harry examined the surrounding area for any clues. He found a number of empty vials, but nothing that indicated how long it would be before she woke up. Harry had to admit that whoever the matron was, she appeared to be taking good care of Row. Still, there was the issue of all the questions that she would face when she finally did wake; an issue Harry was very reluctant to let her face alone.

But what choice do I really have, he thought. I can't stay here, and I can't take her. He looked down at her peaceful face. I hope she has time to use the messenger before she has to talk to anyone, otherwise this could get pretty ugly.....

Harry gave one final try to wake her before admitting defeat and making his way silently out of the castle. When he reached Hogsmede, he went straight to the owl office and sent a letter to Row's friend, Sarah, asking her to send him notes as often as she could about Row's recovery. That done, he apparated back home to explain the situation to a very anxious Jack.

When three days passed and every letter from Sarah said simply, “no change, she’s still unconscious,” Jack wasn’t the only one that was anxious.

“Harry, will you stop pacing, you’re making me nervous,” said Jack, exasperated. “She’s unconscious, which isn’t surprising after what you’ve told me. Sarah said she’s in no real danger, she just needs time to recover.”

Harry sighed heavily and ran his hand through his hair. “I know, I know. I’m just worried that when she wakes up she’s going to get blindsided by all kinds of questions and panic.”

“Well, she’s still got the messenger,” Jack reasoned. “So she can contact us as soon as she’s awake. Everything is going to be fine Harry, you’ll see. You’ve already saved the day, the least you could do is relax.” Jack glanced at his watch and gave a start. “Shit, I’m going to be late for my date. I’ll see you later?” Harry nodded reluctantly and Jack ran to his room to change.

Harry sighed again and was taking a seat by the window when his messenger began to vibrate. With nearly inhuman speed, he whipped it out and read the message.

I’m awake in the hospital wing and Madame Pomfrey says I’ve been out for 3 days. The last thing I remember is getting thrown into a wall and the basilisk going after Ginny. What happened?

Harry whipped out a pen and wrote back.

A phoenix helped me find you and I killed the basilisk in the bathroom, where the professors must have found it. The phoenix understood that you were injured, and took you to the hospital wing. I tried to wake you the next day but you were out cold. Sarah has been sending us updates while we waited for you to wake up.

What happened with you and that boy in the chamber?

I'm not sure. He was yelling about a diary that Ginny had, and when I destroyed it he sort of exploded. I don't know why. Listen, there's some things you should know. When I was at Hogwarts I heard students talking, and they all think that you killed the basilisk and saved Ginny by yourself. They're going to want to know how and why, and you're going to have to be convincing.

There was a pause on Row's end before she replied.

What? How am I supposed to do that, I don't even remember what happened!

Maybe you should use that. Harry replied, thinking quickly. The phoenix that helped me actually blinded the basilisk, you could just say that you rescued Ginny, fought a guy named T.M. Riddle, destroyed the diary, and then blacked out.

I don't think that's going to work, the professors aren't stupid.

You have a better idea?

Silence.

I know it sucks, Row, but there's only a week or so left before you come home. If you can hold out until then, we can figure it out when you get back.

Ok. I have to go, Madame is coming back.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief and felt the tension he'd been carrying for the last week slowly leave him. Row was awake and coming home soon, and that was all he needed to know.

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts

"Enter Severus, Minerva," called Dumbledore jovially.

Snape gave him a suspicious glance as he took his seat, but held his tongue.

“You are both no doubt aware that both Miss Thomas and Miss Weasley are awake?” Both professors nodded. “Good. There will be a small meeting tomorrow, I would like you both to attend. I trust you have no objections?”

Snape scowled, but nodded. “As loathe as I am to admit it,” he drawled, “I am more than a little curious as to how events unfolded. Have you been able to determine why the sorting hat was found in the bathroom?”

“I’m afraid the hat has been rather tight lipped about the entire affair,” Dumbledore chuckled. “All it would say is that it was needed.”

“This secret is not mine to reveal,” the hat said sagely from its position on a shelf. Snape’s scowl deepened.

“Very well,” Dumbledore replied, smiling. “Severus, there was one other thing I would like from you. If you would be so kind, I would appreciate it if you could deposit a memory in my penseive.”

“What memory would that be?” Snape asked cautiously.

“Nothing extreme, my dear boy,” said Dumbledore, waving his hand absently. “I am curious about Miss Thomas, and was hoping you could show me your first encounter with her when you delivered her Hogwarts letter.”

Snape gave the headmaster a bewildered look, but acquiesced by withdrawing the requested memory and placing it in the bowl. With that, he took his leave.

“You’re rather chipper today, Albus,” McGonagall said suspiciously. “Is there a special reason?”

“Indeed there is, Minerva,” replied Dumbledore, twinkling madly. “I believe you should read this report that I received earlier while I

examine the memory Severus has kindly provided. I believe you will find the information quite uplifting.”

Feeling rather confused, McGonagall took the report and opened it while Dumbledore entered the memory. She looked down at the title of the report, and gasped.

To: Albus Dumbledore

From: Stan Klunder, Department of Muggle Affairs

Subject: Harry Potter watch alert

Albus,

I've attached a complete report that was forwarded to me earlier, per your instructions. In summary, Mr. Potter's aunt, a Petunia Dursley, has initiated emancipation proceedings for him, stating that he was unwanted and neglected. She further stated that she wants nothing to do with him and he would be better off on his own. The details of the case are attached, as are the details for two more emancipation cases. Apparently, Mr. Potter has been living with two other individuals who are also to be emancipated, a Mr. Jack Thomas, age 15, and Rowena Thomas, Age 11. Their father filed for emancipation for them, citing the same exact reasoning as Mrs. Dursley. You can read the details of the case, but in summary, it appears that all three will be granted reprieve from their current guardians, however it is still unclear whether Mr. Potter and Ms. Thomas will be completely emancipated or placed under the guardianship of Mr. Jack Thomas until they are older. The three have filed together, and stated in writing that either outcome is acceptable.

If any more information crosses my desk, I will let you know. Good luck.

-Stan

“A rather uplifting missive, wouldn't you say?” Asked Dumbledore with a grin. McGonagall could only nod dumbly. “I have just examined the memory, and Miss Thomas did indeed introduce her two older

brother as Jack and Harry Thomas. I confess that I had suspicions earlier, but with all the excitement this year I was unable to follow them up. In hindsight, the whole thing is rather obvious. Miss Thomas and her brother lived with their father in Surrey, only a few kilometers from the Dursley house. The three must have escaped together and lived as a family, which would explain why she introduced Harry as a second brother."

"But Albus," questioned McGonagall, "what about the cupboard? The anti-locating magic?"

"That brings up something most interesting Minerva," said Dumbledore as he leaned forward conspiratorially. "Something else that I had noticed in Severus's memory is that both Harry and Jack Thomas appeared quite older than they should be. Jack looked to be at least 20 years old, when in fact he is only 15. This also explains how the three of them have been able to live alone for so long without attracting attention."

"What are you saying, Albus?"

"I believe that Mr. Potter not only knows magic, but has been performing it for some time."

"But, but," stammered McGonagall. "How!"

"Oh how I wish I knew, Minerva," replied Dumbledore wistfully. "Remember, we know that he somehow dispatched Severus on the platform, even though we do not know how. If my suspicions are correct, Mr. Potter has been using a glamour to disguise both himself and Jack Thomas for quite some time, a year at least." He leaned forward, twinkling. "I also have reason to believe he may be performing his magic wandlessly."

McGonagall's head was spinning. "And you know this how?"

"I received a message from Arthur Weasley over a year ago, asking me if I knew of any children recently out of Hogwarts that were especially adept at wandless magic, of course I thought nothing of it at the time," Dumbledore replied thoughtfully. "Apparently, he

received a call about a young couple that were using enchanted artifacts as part of a muggle magic show. He described them as a man about 18 years old and a young woman a little younger, and he confronted them after one of their shows. The young man apparently claimed he didn't know what Arthur was talking about, and proceeded to stun both Arthur and his auror escort using wandless magic. I admit that I was doubtful, and when no more evidence was found I dismissed the incident as exaggerated."

"You think it was Mr. Potter and Miss Thomas?"

Dumbledore nodded. "What better way to make a few quid than a little magic?" He said with a chuckle. "Especially if you don't know any better. It was in the right area, and the timing also fits. Furthermore, it explains why Mr. Potter never tried to procure a wand, even after Miss Thomas got hers."

"This is truly staggering, Albus," said McGonagall, amazed. "All this time we've been looking for a kidnapper or someone hiding him. Now you say he's not only been hiding himself, but doing it with a control of wandless magic even you would struggle to duplicate. I ask again, how is this possible?"

"I could, of course, be mistaken," said Dumbledore diplomatically. "He could have acquired a wand on the black market. However, I do not believe that to be the case. This also adds a new dimension to our recent incident with the Chamber of Secrets."

McGonagall's eyes widened. "You think he was there? He and Miss Thomas went to rescue Miss Weasley, she was hurt...."

"My thoughts precisely," replied Dumbledore. "It would explain how the basilisk was defeated despite the injuries sustained by Miss Weasley and Miss Thomas, and how they got to the hospital wing so quickly despite being unconscious. Left on his own, Fawkes would have almost certainly come to me for directions. The fact that he took it upon himself to transport them means that someone was conscious enough to command him, and that person had earned respect enough that Fawkes complied. I admit these are all puzzles that I had

hoped would be answered upon talking to Miss Thomas; never would I have suspected that this would be the answer, however.”

McGonagall sat in silence for a moment, digesting all that she had been told before turning back to the headmaster.

“What do we do about Mr. Potter and Miss Thomas now, Albus?”

“That, Minerva, is what I am trying to decide.” He pulled a newspaper from his desk and handed it to her. The headline read ‘HOGWARTS CHAMBER OF SECRETS REVEALED,’ then, in smaller print: ‘Slytherin’s Monster Basilisk Slain by 11 year old Girl.’ Underneath the headline was a picture of the slain basilisk lying amid the ruined bathroom.

McGonagall scowled as she took the paper. “I saw a similar article yesterday.” She shook her head. “They’re like vultures over a kill, these reporters.”

“Indeed,” Dumbledore nodded sadly. “And if the information in Mr. Klunder’s report is released, it will be even worse.”

McGonagall looked horrified. “It will be a circus!” She shrieked. “Miss Thomas is already being touted as a heroine. That she is practically Harry Potter’s sister will put their faces on every wizarding publication in the country!”

“Precisely,” Dumbledore nodded sagely. “We must also consider that Mr. Potter undoubtedly knows all about the magical world. The fact that he has chosen to remain hidden presents a dilemma as to how we should approach him.”

McGonagall was speechless. Never in her wildest dreams did it occur to her that the reason Harry Potter was not at Hogwarts was that he simply didn’t want to go.

“Remember, Minerva,” interjected Dumbledore. “He knows nothing of why he was sent to the Dursley house, only that he was sent there by someone from our world. He is rightly cautious about revealing himself,” Dumbledore’s gaze became clouded and his shoulders

sagged. "We can only guess what kind of mental damage he's sustained as a result of his torment."

"So," broke in McGonagall after a pause. "What do we do?"

"For now we do nothing," Dumbledore replied. "We talk to Miss Thomas tomorrow and go from there. If we can earn her trust, we may still have a chance with young Mr. Potter."

McGonagall could only nod and desperately hope he was right.

"Come on, you can tell us!"

"For the last time, I don't remember!" Row snapped, before sighing heavily. "I'm sorry, Sarah. It's just that it's bloody frustrating that everyone keeps asking me questions about something I don't even remember. Even worse, I have to meet the headmaster and the other professors in a minute and tell them exactly the same thing. Somehow, I don't think they're going to be happy."

"It's ok," said Sarah, putting a hand on Row's shoulder. "It'll be alright, just tell them what you can remember. I'm sure they'll understand."

Row grumbled as she said goodbye to Sarah and made her way to the headmaster's office. She reached the gargoyle just as Professor Snape was ascending the stairs, and hurried to catch up.

"Ah yes, the guest of honor," said Snape silkily as they entered the headmaster's office. "One of them at least." His gaze fell upon Ginny Weasley, who was already seated and looking very nervous herself.

"Hey Ginny," said Row, taking a seat next to her.

"Hey," said Ginny with a small smile, before leaning forward and whispering, "are you nervous?"

Row nodded her head vigorously and Ginny giggled. She was about to say something else when the headmaster spoke.

“Well then, since everyone is here we might as well get started.” Row looked around and noticed that all four heads of house were in attendance in addition to the headmaster. She swallowed the lump in her throat and tried to focus like Harry had taught her so long ago.

Ginny went first, and Row listened in rapt attention as she explained how she had found the diary after the trip to Diagon Alley and how she had poured her heart into it, only to find that there was actually somebody inside. She spoke of Tom Riddle and how he started so nice, but ended up manipulating and betraying her trust by forcing her to open the chamber and command the basilisk. Row was flabbergasted that it had been Ginny Weasley all along, and remembered Harry saying that he had fought a T.M. Riddle, and had killed him by destroying the diary.

When Ginny finally reached the point where Tom had begun to steal her life in the chamber, she was in tears.

“T-That’s all I remember,” she sniffed. “The next thing I knew, Row was dragging me up the tunnel.”

“I’m sorry for making you relive such a horrible ordeal, Miss Weasley,” said Dumbledore kindly. “Please accept my deepest apologies that we were not able to see what was happening sooner.” Dumbledore shifted his gaze over to Row before continuing. “Now then, Miss Thomas, I do believe you have quite a story to tell,” he said, eyes twinkling.

“Well, that’s the thing sir,” Row said, carefully looking at her hands. “I really don’t remember much. I mean, I remember getting to Ginny and seeing Tom Riddle, and I remember your phoenix appearing, but other than that it’s all a blur.” She started to breathe heavily. “I-It was terrifying,” she stuttered.

Professors Flitwick and Sprout seemed to believe her story. Snape, however, just scowled like there was no tomorrow. He was about to say something when the headmaster held up a hand to stop him.

"I think I would like a moment alone with Miss Thomas," he said to the rest of the room. The professors quickly exited the office with Ginny trailing behind. When the door closed, Dumbledore turned back to Row.

"Now then, Miss Thomas, I'm going to be honest with you, and in return I hope that you can be honest with me." He tried to look her in the eye, but Row averted her gaze. "I know that you only have one biological brother, and that your other brother, Harry Thomas, is actually Harry Potter." The headmaster kept speaking, but Row was no longer listening.

Row's heart was racing so fast she thought it would explode any moment. Of all the things she had expected to hear, that had been the one she was completely unprepared for. Now all she could hear was a loud roaring in her ears as she repeated one thought in her head:

He knows..He knows..He knows..

"Miss Thomas, are you alright?" Asked Dumbledore in concern. "You've gone incredibly pale."

Slowly, Row's mind began to process what was happening.

"Uh, I'm f-fine, sir," she replied hesitantly. "Please, continue."

Dumbledore continued but Row once again tuned him out.

I have to tell Harry, she thought frantically. They'll be coming for him now, and it's all my fault! Why did I have to be so damn curious, it's ruined everything!

She looked up at the headmaster only to realize that he had been silently watching her for the better part of a minute.

"I see this information worries you," he said quietly. Row gave an almost imperceptible nod.

“Miss Thomas, I assure you that I mean Harry no harm,” said Dumbledore with conviction. “This is his world, he belongs here. I only want him to be able to live the life he was born for. I am only concerned for-“

A switch flipped in Row. In a flash, she was no longer nervous. She wasn't sad. She wasn't even scared.

She was furious.

“HOW DARE YOU!” She screamed. “AFTER WHAT YOU LEFT HIM TO, YOU SIT THERE AND SAY YOU MEAN HIM NO HARM! WHO THE BLOODY HELL DO YOU THINK YOU ARE!”

“Miss Thomas, please, calm down,” said an astonished Dumbledore.

“NO I WILL NOT CALM DOWN!” Row roared in response. “YOU PUT HIM INTO HIS OWN PERSONAL HELL! YOU LET THOSE BASTARDS TORTURE HIM FOR FUN HIS ENTIRE LIFE! IT WAS YOUR FAULT. I WON'T LET YOU DO IT AGAIN! WE'LL STOP YOU. HARRY WILL STOP YOU!” Row broke down and started crying, quietly repeating, “He'll stop you,” through her sobs.

Albus Dumbledore could only stare in shock. Not for the first time, he cursed himself for leaving Harry Potter with the Dursley family, and he felt the familiar waves of shame wash over him as he looked at the crying girl before him.

“It's true, of course,” he said in a voice full of regret. “It was my decision to leave him with his Aunt; a decision that I regret more than anything in this world.” Row looked up at that. “I would ask how you know that I was responsible for his placement, but it seems rather irrelevant at the moment. Is it safe to assume that Harry knows this as well?”

Row gave the headmaster a searching look before nodding briefly.

“That does explain a few things,” Dumbledore sighed. “Miss Thomas, I need your help. I have wronged Harry terribly, but this is still his world. We need to bring him back.”

"I won't betray Harry," said Row, glaring through her tears. "If that's what you want you can just kick me out now."

"Please, Miss Thomas," Dumbledore pleaded. "I am only trying to do right by you and Harry, despite what you may think of my previous actions. Had I known the torment that Harry would endure I never would have placed him there."

"You want to do right by us?" Asked Row seriously. Dumbledore nodded. "Then leave us alone. Don't send your professors over, don't try to force him back, just leave. Us. Alone." She gave the headmaster a challenging glare.

"I must admit, Miss Thomas," Dumbledore chuckled sadly. "It has been quite a while since anyone has spoken to me in such a manner."

Row's eyes widened as she realized exactly who she was speaking to, and her face assume a contrite expression. She didn't apologize, however.

"It has been an even longer time," the headmaster continued, "since I have felt as old and inadequate as I do now." The headmaster leaned forward and looked at Row with a serious expression. "You do not trust me, Miss Thomas, and rightfully so. But I will do everything in my power to earn that trust from you and young Mr. Potter, and I will begin by taking your advice. I will not send anyone to your home, nor will I come myself. All I ask in return is that you allow me to owl yourself and Mr. Potter over the summer, and that you will seriously consider what I say."

Row felt cornered. On one hand, making any kind of deal with Dumbledore felt like betraying Harry. On the other hand, what choice did she really have? Despite his kindly attitude, Row didn't believe for one second that he would simply let Harry go. If she agreed, she would at least be able to go home to Harry and Jack first, and if they wanted to run then they could do it together.

"I think I can agree to that sir," she said quietly. "Can I go now?"

Dumbledore looked at her sadly. "I know this is difficult Miss Thomas, but there is still much for us to discuss." He handed her a copy of the newspaper. "As you can see, you have been given sole credit for slaying the basilisk and saving Ginny Weasley. I am not the only person who wants to know exactly what happened, and I'm afraid that your secret will not hold out for long. Furthermore, we will need to deliver a story before I am able to have Hagrid released from Azkaban."

Row's face flashed through a number of emotions before settling on a defeated look.

"This is a nightmare," she muttered as she lowered her head into her hands.

"I was afraid you would see it that way," Dumbledore replied kindly. "If you can tell me what actually happened in the chamber with you and Harry, we can decide how much to tell the ministry and the reporters. I can help you with this, if you will let me."

Row was once again lost in thought.

He knows Harry was there? She thought frantically. Does he know how powerful Harry is? Does he know about the messenger? What am I going to do!

With so many thoughts swimming through her mind, she couldn't think clearly enough to make a decision, and one thought kept repeating in her brain.

I need Harry.

"Professor," she said, looked back at the headmaster. "I need you to give me the rest of the day to think about this."

"I understand your concern, Miss Thomas, however I will need to speak to the ministry by tomorrow at the latest."

“Then give me until tonight,” Row countered. “I’ll have a decision for you by then.”

Dumbledore considered her offered and nodded.

“Very well. When you have reached a decision, you may return to my office. The password is ice mice.” He escorted Row out the door.

When she was gone, he picked up one of the instruments on his desk and examined it carefully, making sure that the tracking charm he had placed on the young woman was working properly. Seeing that it was, he sat down at his desk wearily and wondered just how it was that a single meeting with student could completely wear him out.

When she was clear of the headmaster’s office, the first thing Row did was whip out her messenger.

Harry. Emergency.

I need to talk to you now, in person

Very important.

-R

A second later her reply appeared.

I’m coming, same place as last time.

-H

Breathing a sigh of relief, Row made her way to the entrance hall to wait for Harry. Twenty minutes later she felt a hand on her shoulder.

“Ok, we’re silenced. Tell me.”

As succinctly as she could, Row told him everything she had learned in Dumbledore’s office. She told him that it was Ginny who had

opened the Chamber of Secrets because she'd been possessed by Tom Riddle's diary, and that it was already in the papers that Row had rescued her single handedly. She then went on to tell him what Dumbledore had told her in private. When she was finished at last by telling him about the deal that the headmaster proposed, she broke down in tears.

"I'm so sorry Harry. He's found you and it's all my fault!" She sobbed.

Harry put a comforting arm around her shoulder and pulled her close.

"Shh," he whispered softly. "It's ok, you didn't do anything wrong. We'll deal with this, ok?" She gave him a teary smile and nodded. "Good. Now, let me think...."

Harry sat back and sighed while he processed this new information. No matter how he looked at it, it was bad news. In his usual style, Harry immediately started to break down his options, and he didn't like what he found.

It's basically accept Dumbledore's offer or run for it, he thought with a grimace. Even if we run, there's no way to prevent them from finding us again. He sighed again.

"Row, I have to ask you for something," he said carefully. "I need to know if Dumbledore was sincere, and I'd like to look at your memories of the meeting, if you're up to it."

Row just nodded and situated herself so that she and Harry were eye to eye as he carefully entered her mind. She relaxed completely, allowing him to direct the flow of the memory as it played. When he was finished, he withdrew from her mind and lost himself in thought once more.

"What are you thinking, Harry?" Row asked, breaking the silence.

"He seems sincere, but it just doesn't make any sense!" He finished with a frustrated sigh. "Why is he so interested in me? Hell, he's more interested in me than the magical government is, and now he's found me and he says he won't come after me? Bollocks." Harry got up

from his seat and began to pace. "There's something going on here, and it's more than the boy-who-lived crap." He paused and moved his invisible gaze to Row. "Still, we really don't have much of a choice, we'll have to take his offer, at least for now. Do you have a piece of parchment?"

Row pulled out a quill and piece of parchment and handed it to Harry, who immediately began to write. Row watch bemusedly as he scribbled line after line onto the parchment, and was just about to ask what he was writing when he stopped abruptly and handed it back to her.

"This highlights almost everything that happened in the chamber, so you can give it to Dumbledore. I tried to downplay my actual spell casting, but he's still going to know I can do magic. If he asks, tell him I have a wand but you don't know how I got it. Does he know about the emancipation?"

"I don't know, we didn't get that far," Row replied hesitantly.

"Whatever you do, don't bring it up then. That's the last thing we need him to find out about. Once that goes through, at least we'll be free on a legal level, which should give us a little more leverage." He racked his brain to think of anything he was forgetting. "I can't think of anything else that's really important right now. If you need something, use the messenger. Actually, don't tell him about that either, if you can help it."

Row nodded before asking in a small voice, "Harry, are you mad at me?"

Harry was surprised by the question, but promptly shook his head.

"I'm not mad, Row, I'm just frustrated. If I'm honest with myself, I know it wasn't realistic for me to stay hidden forever when there's practically an entire world looking for me, and I definitely don't blame you for anything that's happened." He sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "It's just that this is really the end of the all the freedom I've had. I'll probably end up coming to Hogwarts, which isn't bad in itself, but there's going to be a lot of people who want a piece

of me, and that I'm not looking forward to." He moved to engulf Row in a hug and whispered the rest in her ear "No matter what happens, it isn't your fault, Row. Remember that. I knew we'd have to deal with this eventually, this just speeds things up. Everything will be fine, I promise."

"Thanks Harry," Row sniffed as they parted. She wiped her sleeve across her face and took a deep breath before gathering her things and starting back inside Hogwarts.

Harry waited until she was gone from sight before he too made his retreat. When he reached the edge of the wards, he turned and gave Hogwarts castle one final glance.

Why do I get the feeling that my battles are only just beginning? He thought to himself. Sighing, he crossed over the school boundary and silently apparated home.

A/N Well, our boy finally got found out. I actually wanted to put this off for a while longer, but once they filed for emancipation it just wasn't realistic for Dumbledore to not find out. Same thing with the chamber, it's not likely that Dumbledore would accept a simple "I don't remember." I guess it was inevitable. (sigh)

Hopefully you can see from this chapter that Dumbledore isn't a manipulative bastard, but he's not an angel either. He does the right thing by not trying to force Harry back and approaching him slowly, but at the same time he puts a tracking charm on Row to make sure that he doesn't lose him again. I like Dumbledore, but he can be a little slimy sometimes...

Ok , I was gonna end it there but another skit popped into my head. Sorry.

Death Eater Casino Night at Wynn Las Vegas

Voldemort:"...hit me. DAMN! Wormtail, you took my card again! Switch places with me."

Wormtail: "Yes master. I'm sorry master."

Bellatrix: "Who the hell is Steve Wynn anyway?"

Dolohov: "Some stupid muggle, who cares. I'm going to go steal that old lady's change cup." (leaves)

Cocktail Waitress: "Drinks anyone?"

Voldemort: "151, straight."

Bellatrix: (hesitates and then whispers in the waitresses ear)

Waitress: "Are you sure? You know there's no alcohol in a Shirley Temple."

Bellatrix: (looking scared) "WHAT? I didn't order a Shirley Temple you muggle bitch! CRUCIO!" (waitress screaming)

Wormtail: "Shirley Temple? That sounds good, I'll have one of those."

(Silence)

Wormtail: "What?"

Voldemort: (shakes head) "Wormtail, you have 12 and he's showing a 5. You can hit if you want but DO NOT TAKE HIS BUST CARD!"

Wormtail: "Hmmm, hit me." (Gets a 10) "Oops."

(Dealer turns over 15 and hits a 6 for 21)

Voldemort: (drawing his wand) "What did I just say Wormtail? About the bust card? Do you see where I'm going with this?"

Wormtail: (sighs) "Uh, Wormtail, crucio?"

Voldemort: (strokes chin) "Actually, I was thinking we put the dealer under imperious, but let's try your idea first. CRUCIO!"

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts

Severus Snape opened the door to the headmaster's office and strode in, only to find it empty. Annoyed, he started to sit down and wait when an open file on the desk caught his eye.

"What's the brat done now," he muttered, picking up the file.

A few minutes later, his reading was interrupted as Albus Dumbledore entered the office.

"I was not aware we had an appointment, Severus," he said, his eyes lacking their usual twinkle.

Completely ignoring the headmaster's comment, Snape slowly looked up with wide eyes.

"She lives with Potter!" He asked incredulously.

"Indeed she does," Dumbledore replied evenly. "You met him, in fact, when you delivered her Hogwarts letter."

Snape looked like he wanted to slap himself. "Her second brother?" Dumbledore smiled and nodded. "Certainly this cannot continue then, headmaster!" Snape exclaimed as he rose from his seat. "A Potter and a squib? What is being done?"

"Calm yourself, Severus," said Dumbledore calmly. "She is quite happy where she is, of that I have no doubt. She is also our only confirmed link to Mr. Potter; we would do well not to antagonize her."

Snape scowled. "I see no difficulty. Drag the Potter boy back and put him where you please. As I have said before, there are many families that would be honored to accept Miss Thomas as their charge."

"To forcibly separate them from each other would be unwise," Dumbledore replied in measured tones. "We need to bring Mr. Potter to Hogwarts by choice, not by force. Otherwise we will only lose him later. Miss Thomas is a similar case; she is fiercely loyal to Harry and

I have no doubt she would not react favorably to being separated from him or her brother.”

Snape’s scowl deepened. “So nothing is being done then?”

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. “Our first priority is to bring Mr. Potter back to Hogwarts and into our world. I will not jeopardize that, Severus.”

“The boy is not even here and already the school revolves around him,” said Snape bitterly. “This is a mistake, headmaster. The boy will be insufferable.”

“Nevertheless, he is needed,” Dumbledore replied.

Snape bit back an angry retort and gave a curt nod before turning on his heel to leave.

If he wants Potter, I’ll get him Potter, thought Snape angrily. Then we’ll see how important the brat is.

Row woke up on the last day of term relieved that she was finally going home. Having packed all her belongings the night before, she made her way leisurely to the bathroom only to be confronted by a very angry looking Sarah.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Sarah asked heatedly.

“Tell you what?” Row asked, confused.

“This!” Sarah spat, thrusting a newspaper into her hands.

With a bemused look at her friend, Row looked down at the paper’s headline and froze.

HOGWARTS HEROINE ROWENA THOMAS: THE LAST RAVENCLAW?

By Sandy Becker

Sources at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry have recently revealed that Rowena Thomas, the first year student recently responsible for the rescue of a fellow classmate from the infamous Chamber of Secrets, may in fact be the last descendent of Rowena Ravenclaw. A recent anonymous tip obtained by this reporter indicates that Miss Thomas's full name is Rowena Selena T'Albieran Thomas, indicating a possible blood relation to the T'Albieran family which was thought to be deceased.

Miss Thomas is currently attending Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry as a first year student, and already.....

Row looked up from the paper with an absolutely gobsmacked expression.

"What, I... what is this?" She finally managed. "Is this some kind of sick joke? I've never heard of any of this! This is what you're angry about!"

"You never told us about the chamber either," Sarah continued heatedly. "I know the headmaster didn't tell us everything, and you never mentioned that the phoenix saved you. Did you know about all of this before?"

"OF COURSE NOT!" Row screeched. "HOW CAN YOU ASK ME THAT?"

"You should listen to her, you know," came the voice of Luna Lovegood as she exited the bathroom. "She's telling the truth."

Row gave her an odd look. "Uh, thanks Luna," she said, before finishing under her breath, "I think."

"I thought you lied to me," replied Sarah, abashed. "And with everything else, it just sounded true. I'm sorry."

Row seemed to deflate at that before tiredly rubbing her eyes. "It's ok, I'm sorry I yelled. I just don't know how much more of this crap I can

take,” she sighed and looked at the paper again. “I’ve never heard the name T’Albieran before in my life. I’m just glad we’re going home today. How long do we have, anyway?”

“The train leaves in 2 hours, so I’d better get packed,” her friend responded.

“I’ll help.”

Two hours later found a very annoyed Row sharing a compartment with Sarah, Hermione, and Padma. It seemed that the entire school had seen the morning paper and decided to verify its authenticity.

“If I have to tell one more person that I don’t know anything about this...” Row muttered threateningly. Hermione looked at her before pulling her wand and pointing it at the door.

“Colloportus,” she said, giving her wand a quick flick. She was rewarded with a squelching sound and turned back to Row with a shy smile.

“Thanks Hermione,” Row smiled back.

The group passed the rest of the ride reliving the past year and discussing each other’s plans for the summer holiday. By the time the train finally pulled into King’s Cross Station, Row had almost completely forgotten the offending article and was simply happy to be returning home. She said goodbye to her friends and made her way onto the platform, only to be stopped from behind by a nervous looking Ginny Weasley.

“Hey, I uh, just wanted to say thank you,” Ginny stammered. “You know, for everything in the chamber and all.”

“Well, I don’t know how much I really did,” Row hesitated. “I’m just glad we both made it out safe.”

“Yeah,” Ginny replied. “Do, do you think I could owl you this summer? I know you and Hermione are friends and she’s always been nice to me, but I understand if-“

"I'd like that Ginny," Row cut her off with a smile.

"Really?" Ginny grinned. "Great! Well, there's my family. You'd better get going if you don't want to be the victim of a Molly Weasley bone-crushing hug."

Row laughed. "Ok, thanks for the warning. Talk to you later?"

Ginny smiled and nodded before turning to meet her family. Row took out her messenger and scribbled a quick note saying everything was fine and she was on her way out. Grabbing her surprisingly light trunk, she made her way to the taxi stand outside and found both Jack and Harry waiting for her.

"Hey sis," said Jack quietly as he pulled her into a hug. "Harry told me about everything. You ok?"

She nodded and moved to hug Harry while Jack hailed a cab.

Just like their last trip, the trio avoided talking about any magical subjects on the ride home, so Row focused instead on talking about her friends.

"Hermione is starting to come out of her shell a little, I think," she was saying. "I heard she really told off some boy in her house not too long ago for trying to prank her. She's still really shy and nervous though, especially around the Slytherins."

"What about them?" Asked Harry, interested.

"Well, they have the most bullies, definitely," Row replied thoughtfully. "And they're known for being the darkest and most dangerous house. There's a couple of guys in that house that basically get away with anything they want because their parents are powerful, and they lord it over everybody else like it makes them better people."

"And your friend is afraid of them because of that?" Queried Jack.

"Well, actually she's more afraid because a lot of them are racists." Row replied. "You know about her parents, right?" She mouthed the word 'muggleborn' and both her brothers nodded. "Well, a lot of them have this pure-blood supremacy belief, and they think she's below them. Some of them call her 'mudblood,' which is a serious insult. I think that's why she's afraid of them"

"Do they say things like that to you?" Asked Harry, his eyes hard.

"Not really," Row replied thoughtfully. "But Gryffindor and Slytherin have always been rivals, so the most insults fly between people in those two houses. Ravenclaws generally stay out of it. It's worse for Hermione, though, because she doesn't have anybody in her house to stick up for her, so she gets bullied more than normal."

"I don't like bullies," said Harry coldly.

Row giggled. "Hero Harry strikes again!"

That sent Jack into fits as well when he saw the extremely annoyed look on Harry's face. He opened his mouth to retort but Jack cut him off.

"Yeah, yeah, we know. Great gift, responsible. Blah blah," he ended laughing again.

Harry abruptly closed his mouth and turned back to the window.

"Oh, sod off," he grumbled, making his siblings laugh even harder.

Row struggled to listen to the exchange through her giggles, and finally completely broke down at Harry's final comment. It was good to be home.

The next morning, Row handed Harry his first letter from Dumbledore.

Dear Mr. Potter,

I hope that this letter finds you well, and that you are able to look past my transgressions enough to read to its conclusion. You have no doubt already discussed some of this with Miss Thomas, but I would like to say it to you directly.

I'm sorry, Harry. As you are aware, it was my decision to place you with the Dursley family after your parents died; a decision that I regret more than anything else in the world. The only excuse I can offer is that I had no reason to believe that you would be treated so badly, and that living with your Aunt provided you a magical protection you could not get anywhere else. In my ignorance, I did not consider protection from your relatives, and I can only beg your forgiveness.

You are no doubt wondering why I would even consider placing you in the muggle world rather than the magical one. What you cannot know is that I was the executor of your parents will, meaning that I was responsible for carrying out their last wishes. Unfortunately, all the individuals named by your parents as potential guardians were unable, for various reasons, to take you in. This left me in a quandary, since I had effectively run out of options, and I elected to keep you safe and isolated in the muggle world. I will not pretend to know how difficult it was for you, Harry. All I can ask is that you allow me the chance to make up for this incredible mistake and to help you assume your rightful place in the magical world.

To this end, I have contacted a friend of mine who was also a good friend of your parents when they went to school, and he has agreed to meet with you if you wish. His name is Remus Lupin, and he was one of the individuals your parents wanted you to live with, but under magical law he is unable to have custody of children. If you want to know the reason, you will have to ask him, as it is a very personal matter.

I know that you do not trust me, nor do I believe that you should. However, I truly do mean you no harm, and I do not wish you force you into anything. I honestly believe that you would enjoy a much more complete life in the magical world, it is the life your parents wanted for you.

I ask you for one favor, however. I do not know how you managed to divert all your owls to the cupboard at the Dursley house, but it would be much easier if you were reachable directly, rather than through Miss Thomas. If you could modify your owl protection to allow my letters, I would appreciate it very much.

Also, you are no doubt aware that Miss Thomas is currently quite popular in wizarding publications. I have taken the liberty of making a statement regarding the incident in the Chamber of Secrets, and have discouraged any further contact with Miss Thomas. I have also done my utmost to ensure that no one else in the wizarding world find you until you are ready. I hope this meets with your approval.

If you have any questions for me, please send them at your leisure and I will answer all that I can.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Without a word, Harry passed the letter to Row, who immediately started reading.

“Well?” Asked an anxious Jack. “What’d he say?”

“Not a lot actually,” replied Harry as he took a seat on the couch. “Mostly he was apologizing about putting me with the Dursleys and explaining why he did it. I really don’t know how to feel about that.” He frowned. “It turns out he’s the executor of my parents will, so at least I should finally be able to get some answers about that. He also said he’ll set me up with somebody who knew my parents if I want to meet him, so overall it’s not as bad as I was expecting. I still don’t trust him though, and I’m really confused about the cupboard comment.”

“Are you going to meet the guy?” Jacked asked. Harry gave him a confused look. “The one who knew your parents, are you going to meet him?”

"I think you should," piped in Row as she finished the letter. "It can't hurt, and you'll be able to tell if he's lying about anything."

"That's true," Harry nodded thoughtfully. "I guess I will then, but not until after the emancipation hearing. We can't afford to let anything screw that up."

"Does the Hogwarts Headmaster know about that yet?" Asked Jack.

"I don't think so, but I'm not sure," replied Row. "If he does, he hasn't mentioned it."

"There's been no attempt to stop us yet, in any case," put in Harry. "So we're still looking good."

"Actually, that reminds me," said Row glumly. "This was in the paper yesterday." She handed Harry the Daily Prophet article hailing her as the last Ravenclaw.

"I guess it's possible..." said Harry slowly when he was finished reading. "I mean, you were adopted from an orphanage as a baby, right?"

"And mum died right afterwards," said Jack. "So she wouldn't have had time to tell you. Actually, she might not have even known."

"How much do remember about your mum, Jack?" Asked Harry quietly.

"Not much, really," he replied quietly. "It's more of a feeling, you know? She loved me, I know that. It's like I can remember feeling protected and cared for."

"I have no memory of my mother," said Harry softly. "My first memory is the cupboard under the stairs."

The three of them were silent after that until Jack cleared his throat.

"Well, that's all over with now. Just think, another week and we'll be free for real!"

"Yeah, you're right," said Row. "I just don't want any more attention until everything is sorted out. We have enough drama right now."

Jack snorted. "Yeah, I think that's pretty safe to say."

It was only two days later that things began to fall apart.

Harry was in the training area practicing some spell work when Row came rushing in with a letter in her hands, only to find Harry standing in the middle of a very disheveled room looking incredibly happy with himself.

"Uh, Harry?" Row asked, her letter temporarily forgotten. "What are you doing?"

"I did it!" Harry exclaimed happily. "I finally got it right!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Huh? Oh!" Harry seemed to shake himself out of his stupor. "You remember how Jack was talking about how he found me unconscious that one morning because I'd hit myself with a spell?" Row nodded. "Well, I've been trying to get a different version of a concussion hex to work for me, and I finally did it."

"Concussion hex?" Asked Row. "We haven't learned that yet."

"Really?" Asked Harry, surprised. "Well, watch." He waved his hand and 2 chairs floated to one side of the room and landed a few feet apart with their backs to each other. Harry whipped his hand forward and the chairs were thrown violently away from each other, as if the air between them had exploded outwards.

"It used to be called an exploding air hex," said Harry as he returned the chairs to their normal position. "Basically it creates a shockwave, or concussion, emanating from a single point. The problem is, the point generally has to be far enough away from you that you don't get

hit too, which means it's pretty useless if your attacker is close to you."

Harry turned and summoned 5 more chairs, positioning them in a ring around him.

"What I've been trying to do is create the same effect emanating from wherever I'm standing," he continued. "That way you could use it no matter how close they were, and it would be perfect if you were ever surrounded. That's how Jack found me unconscious" he said sheepishly. "I tried it but hit myself and cracked my head against the wall. I think I've got it now though, stand back."

Row moved back and watched as Harry's face took on a look of complete concentration. Suddenly his body seemed to shimmer, and he threw his arms out violently. The ring of chairs exploded away from him in all directions, and Row had to duck to avoid being hit. When she looked back at Harry, he was smiling again.

"See? I did it!"

"How long have you been working on this, Harry?" Row asked as she surveyed the damage. All of the chairs had been thrown at least 15 feet away, and two of them had broken apart upon landing.

"A few weeks maybe," he said dismissively. "I've got a couple of other ideas, but I wanted to get this one down first. What's that in your hand?"

"What?" The question caught Row off-guard until she remembered the reason she needed to find him in the first place. "Oh, this could be really bad Harry. It's about the emancipation, read it."

Harry took the letter from her hand and began to read.

Dear Ms. Thomas,

I regret to inform you that your emancipation hearing has been delayed due to a recent claim filed by your uncle, Severus T. Snape. Mr. Snape has submitted a petition to become your guardian, and

your case has been delayed until such time that the claims from both parties can be reviewed by the department.

Should you have any more questions, you may contact...

"Snape? Isn't he a professor at Hogwarts?" Asked Harry angrily.

Row nodded. "He teaches potions, but how can he be my uncle?"

Harry was about to respond when an owl flew into the flat and perched on Row's shoulder, extending its leg. Row unrolled the parchment and looked at it in confusion before handing it to Harry.

"It's for you."

Bewildered, Harry took the parchment and began to read.

Potter,

As you have no doubt been informed, I have recently filed for guardianship of Miss Thomas. Do not bother asking how I know this, it is irrelevant. I am also the man you attacked on the train platform last year. I'm sure you remember.

I have been informed that you would prefer to continue your current living arrangements with Miss Thomas. If I am appointed as her guardian, I guarantee this will not happen. Furthermore, she will have no contact with the muggle world whatsoever, and that includes her real brother, the squib.

I write this letter to offer you a deal. The headmaster wants you to come to Hogwarts, so you will come, and you will not make any attempt to leave. In return, I will withdraw my petition in the muggle court, and Miss Thomas can have her emancipation. If you mention this to the headmaster in any way, I will make sure that you do not see her again until she is 17 and out of my control.

Severus Snape

As soon as he had finished, the letter burst into flames in his hand.

"What the-" Exclaimed Jack as Harry extinguished the burning parchment. Harry glanced at him quickly, having been so engrossed in the letter that he hadn't heard him approach.

"What did it say, Harry?" Asked a concerned Row.

Harry ruthlessly reigned in his anger and answered in a calm voice. "It was from Snape. He says he'll drop his petition if I agree to attend Hogwarts. He's blackmailing me."

Row looked horrified and Jack looked furious.

"Who the fuck does he think he is?" Jack exploded. "Uncle my ass! How come we've never heard of him? What a-" he abruptly stopped when he heard a strangled sob and turned to see his sister with tears in her eyes.

"What are we going to do?" She asked fearfully. "I know it's all my fault, but I don't want to live somewhere else! I want to stay here with you!" She sniffed.

"Hey, don't worry about," said Jack, patting her shoulder. "You're not going anywhere, right Harry?"

"Absolutely," Harry replied. "I'm going to talk to our solicitor about this, but even if it turns out to be legit, there's no way anyone is splitting us up."

"You mean it?" Asked Row in a small voice.

"Yeah, I mean it," Harry forced a smile. "It's not like he's asking for a lot anyway, since I'm sure Dumbledore was going to insist that I come to Hogwarts next year. Honestly, I'd already resigned myself to the fact that I'd be going, I just don't like being blackmailed." He scowled. "It leaves a bad taste in my mouth, like he thinks he owns me."

"I don't like it either," Jack said, looking thoughtful. "I mean, you're already talking to the headmaster, right? Then out of nowhere this Snape guy comes in trying to push you around." Jack's eyes

suddenly flashed. "If he really is our uncle, he's got a lot of explaining to do."

"He might be Row's uncle, but not yours," said Harry thoughtfully. "She was adopted, so he could be her uncle by birth."

"In that case, he's got even more questions to answer," Jack scowled. "You don't think this is a ploy by the people at Hogwarts do you?"

"I wouldn't put it past them," Harry said evenly. "But it really doesn't matter at this point. Like I said, it's not like he's asking for anything big, so if the solicitor says he's really your uncle then I'll take his offer, at least until you're emancipated. I'm not above going back on the deal once we get what we want, anyway. That's what he gets for blackmailing me."

"I didn't even think of that," Jack said, grinning. "That'd really stick it to him! Good one, mate!"

"I'll do anything I have to to keep us together," said Harry seriously. "We're a family; and nothing is going to change that."

It took a day for Harry's solicitor to get back to him with information on Severus Snape. When it turned out that Snape was indeed Jack and Row's uncle, Harry immediately sent an owl to Snape indicating that he agreed to the terms and would attend Hogwarts starting the next year. After that, he finished the letter he had been writing to the headmaster and told him the same thing. That done, he settled in to wait.

He didn't have to wait long. The next morning Harry got a phone call from his solicitor informing him that Severus Snape had withdrawn his claim for guardianship, and that Row would still be able to present her case at the hearing.

At dinnertime, Harry received a reply from Dumbledore as well. As expected, the headmaster was rather pleased with his last letter.

Dear Mr. Potter,

I am relieved and overjoyed that you have decided to attend Hogwarts next year. It gives me hope that I may still be able to atone for the sins I have committed against you. Also, I would like to thank you for making yourself accessible by owl once more, it will make correspondence much easier.

As to your questions regarding your parents will.

Your father, James Potter, had three close friends that were to receive you in the event of your parents' death. They were all great friends in Gryffindor together, and remained inseparable even after Hogwarts. The first two, I'm sorry to say, are dead. Both died bravely in the last war opposing Lord Voldemort.

The third friend of your parents is Remus Lupin, who should be contacting you shortly now that owls can once again reach you. He could not take you in for legal reasons, which he shall no doubt explain in person.

The two other individuals named by your parents as potential guardians were Frank and Alice Longbottom. Both Frank and Alice are currently in the long term wing at Saint Mungo's Hospital in a catatonic state due to the prolonged torture they suffered following an encounter with Lord Voldemort's followers. Again, I am sorry, Harry.

As for your inheritance, the vault that you currently have access to was set up as a trust account that you can access until you are 17, at which time you will receive the full inheritance of the Potter family. When that time comes, you will find yourself quite wealthy, although I know that it is a poor substitute for all that has been taken from you.

I have attached the book list for first, second, and third year students with this letter. I do not know what subjects you have studied, or how extensive your knowledge is. I would be happy to discuss the progress you have made on your own either by owl or in person, and I am especially interested to hear how you were able to survive your encounter in the Chamber of Secrets. Truly, you must be a very talented young man.

If you wish to attend classes with students your own age, I would be happy to provide you with a summer tutoring schedule in any Hogwarts subject, should you require it.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

When Harry had finished reading the letter, he handed it to Row. After reading the first paragraph, Row gave Harry a questioning glance.

“How did you do that owl thing, anyway?” She asked.

“I don’t really know,” Harry said, shrugging. “He said I wasn’t accessible by owl and that I’d done it myself. I meditated on it a couple days ago, and basically focused on my desire for owls to reach me wherever I was. I didn’t even know it had worked until he mentioned it.”

“You’re a strange one, Harry Potter,” said Row with a shake of her head.

“Yeah,” Harry grumbled. “Don’t I know it.”

Harry spend the rest of the week preparing for the emancipation hearing, and was understandably nervous when the time finally came. After everything he’d dealt with in the last few weeks, Harry couldn’t help but expect something disastrous to happen.

As it turned out, his worries were mostly baseless. The hearing proceeded exactly how the solicitor had said it would, with Harry, Jack, and Row all presenting their cases individually before Jack spoke for them as a group. Once all the statements had been made and evidence presented, the judge considered the case before delivering his verdict.

"I have made my decision," the judge began. "Mr. Jack Thomas will be granted emancipation. He is to be considered a full adult in the eyes of the law from this day forward, with all the rights and privileges that entails. Mr. Thomas will also be entrusted with the care of his sister, Miss Rowena Thomas, who shall be his charge until she reaches the age of 18. Miss Thomas will be completely emancipated from her previous guardian." The judge paused before looking over at Harry. "In the case of Mr. Potter, I find myself in a bit of a quandary. Mr. Potter, I have no doubt that you can take care of yourself, and I commend you for finding friends that are as supportive as yours are. However, I cannot in good faith grant adult status to a 12 year old boy. As such, I am also appointing Mr. Thomas as your guardian, under the condition that your case be re-examined yearly to ensure that everything remains in order. Also, your family will be assigned a social worker who you will be required to meet with once a month." The judge looked down at Harry only to find him wearing a large grin. "I take it this arrangement is acceptable?" He asked, amused.

"Definitely, sir. Thank you." Replied Harry politely before he was pulled into a 3 way hug.

"We did it, we're really free!" Row exclaimed as they left the courthouse.

"Well, seeing as how I am the adult now," said Jack pompously. "I'll expect you two to obey me, and no back talk!"

Row snorted and Harry grinned.

"I don't know, Jack, I might have to fight you for it if you act like that," he said nonchalantly.

"Woa, hey, enough of that," Jack raised his arms in surrender. Row seized her opportunity and began to tickle him mercilessly.

"It's so obvious that the judge made the right decision," said Harry over the laughter. "I mean, just look at how mature you are."

"Shut it, you," Jack grumbled as he regained his feet. "Anyway, let's go home. I have a date."

His only response was two sets of rolling eyes.

Harry celebrated his newfound freedom the next day with a trip to Diagon Alley, where he purchased all the books from Dumbledore's list that he didn't already have. When he was finished, he made his way to Ollivander's to get his wand.

"Hello?" Harry called when he entered the empty shop. "Is there anybody-" He stopped abruptly when an old man seemed to materialize behind the counter.

For a moment, the old man looked at him quizzically, before he seemed to find what he was looking for and smiled.

"Well, Mr. Potter, I was wondering when I'd be seeing you," he said.

Harry's eyes darted around the store quickly before he realized that they were alone.

"You can see through my glamour?" He asked, fixing the old man with a questioning glare.

"That is indeed a skill I have," Mr. Ollivander replied with a slight smile. "It is almost as rare as say, performing magic without a wand. Both useful, wouldn't you say?"

Harry's eyes narrowed, but he could only nod.

"Now then," said Ollivander as he moved to the shelves behind him. "Let us see what I have for you." He withdrew a long box and removed a walnut colored wand from it. "Ten inches, Mahogany, good for Transfiguration, much like your father's wand." He handed the wand to Harry, who immediately knew it wasn't right.

His suspicion proved true when, at Mr. Ollivander's insistence, he attempted a simple levitation charm and destroyed half of the front counter.

"Well, no matter," said Ollivander pleasantly. "We'll find the wand for you, Mr. Potter, don't you doubt it."

Half an hour and 10 wands later, Harry was beginning to think that perhaps he couldn't use a wand at all. He was about to say as much when he caught Mr. Ollivander bringing him another wand with a strange look on his face.

He seemed to hesitate before offering the wand to Harry. "Perhaps.....this one." He said carefully. Shrugging, Harry reached for the wand and wrapped his fingers around the handle.

For a moment, Harry couldn't tell what was happening. As soon as he grasped the wand, the room seemed to disappear and his every sense was consumed by a feeling of intense power accompanied by a beautiful song. As he regained his senses, he was amazed at the amount of sheer magical power he felt flowing through him. Instantly, he knew he'd found his wand.

Belatedly, he realized that he was grinning like an idiot in front of an amazed Mr. Ollivander. With a sigh, he released his hold on the wand and placed it back in the box on the counter.

"That's the one," he said with certainty. "How much?"

"Never, in all my years have I seen such a display, Mr. Potter," said a stupefied Ollivander. "That wand was made for you and you alone, of that I have no doubt. It is curious, however, that you should be destined for this wand, when its brother gave you that scar."

Harry's head snapped up. "Voldemort?"

Mr. Ollivander flinched. "Yes indeed. The phoenix whose feather resides in your wand gave one other feather that resides in the wand of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Curious indeed."

"A phoenix?" Harry asked curiously. "It wouldn't happen to have been Albus Dumbledore's phoenix, Fawkes, would it?"

“Well, yes, actually,” replied a surprised Ollivander. “How did you know?”

“Lucky guess,” said Harry dismissively. “Now, how much for the wand?”

It was late afternoon by the time Harry finally exited Ollivander’s with his new wand. Looking at his watch, Harry remembered that Jack was going out with Christy again tonight, and he had promised Row that the two of them would work on wandless magic together. Securing his belongings, he apparated back to their flat...

...and into a firestorm.

“I TOLD YOU I LEFT THE MESSAGE BY THE PHONE YOU GREAT PRAT! Row screamed.

“THEN WHERE DID IT GO, HUH?” Jack yelled back. “I TOLD YOU I WAS WAITING FOR HER CALL AND YOU DELIBERATELY IGNORED ME!”

“I DID NOT! YOU SPEND TOO MUCH TIME WITH HER ANYWAY!”

“HA! I KNEW IT! I KNEW YOU’D TRY SOMETHING LIKE THIS, YOU’RE ALWAYS-“

BOOM!

Both Jack and Row jumped a foot in the air before whirling to face a very annoyed Harry Potter.

“I don’t know what you guys are arguing about,” he said evenly. “But unless you want to hear another cannon blast charm, I’d suggest you tone it down a notch.”

“But Harry, he-“

“Don’t put me in the middle,” Harry interrupted, holding up his hands. “I don’t like her either, but she’s Jack’s girlfriend and he’s a free man.

I'm going to put these books in my library, let me know when you're ready for some practice."

"HMPH!" Row huffed, before storming off to her room.

Jack looked at Harry and shrugged. "Women, what're you going to do?" Harry shrugged back. "Well, thanks to Row I'm late, so I'll see you guys tomorrow," said Jack as he grabbed his coat. Harry gave a half hearted wave before making summoning his trunk and putting his new books inside.

When he was finished, he pulled out the first year potions book and began to read. Thirty minutes later, Row came out looking contrite.

"I'm sorry about earlier," she began. "I just don't like how Jack's been lately. And I really don't like that girlfriend of his."

"Don't worry about it," replied Harry nonchalantly. "She's enough to get on anyone's nerves."

"Ain't that the truth," Row snorted. "Whatcha reading?"

"First year potions," Harry replied. "I didn't want to end up with Snape as a tutor, but I don't want to be behind either."

"How's it going?"

"Not too bad, actually," Harry said as he gestured to the rest of the books around him. "From what I can tell, I'm well ahead of the third year curriculum in Charms, Defense, and Transfiguration. Actually, I've read most everything covered in History of Magic as well, although I skipped over some of the goblin rebellions. Astronomy is pretty self explanatory, so really the only subjects I'm behind in are Herbology and Potions. I figure I'll read the first two years of Potions first, then Herbology, and if I have time after that I'll look at the third year books."

"You're that far ahead, huh?" Asked Row, impressed. "How about the defense training you were doing, are you going to tell anybody about that?"

“Not if I can help it, no,” Harry replied evenly. “Third year Defense Against the Dark Arts focuses mostly on dark creatures anyway, and that’s a topic I pretty much ignored. As for the rest, I told you I got stuck in Transfiguration, right?” Row nodded. “Well, that actually ended up being a real problem, because I can’t seem to conjure anything substantial.” Seeing Row’s confused look, he continued.

“Defense and Charms both come really easy to me, like I told you. So when I was finished with the regular books, I moved on to the advanced topics. The problem is, almost all advanced defense techniques involve some sort of high level transfiguration or conjuring. Like this spell,” Harry summoned a book and opened it to a page for Row to read. “This is an advanced attack called a spell whip; it’s basically a whip that you can charge with a specific charm or curse and use it to attack.”

“Is that better than a regular curse?” Row asked.

“Well, you need a partially corporeal shield to block it,” replied Harry. “A normal curse can be blocked by a weak magic shield, like protego. This can’t.”

“Corporeal..? Never mind.” Said Row, shaking her head. “Go on.”

“Well, I can cast the charm or curse on a whip no problem,” Harry continued. “But if I can’t reliably conjure a whip from my hand, the spell is worthless. Almost everything in here is like that; it’s a combination of conjuring, transfiguration, charms, curses, and the like.”

“Wow, this is some really advanced stuff, Harry,” said Row as she flipped through the book. “Where did you get this?”

“I got it in Knockturn Alley a couple months back.”

“You went to Knockturn Alley!” Row squeaked. “Isn’t dangerous there?”

"It could be, but I was disguised," Harry replied evenly. "I got some other books there, but this was the only one worth anything. Actually, I got one other book that might be useful, it's supposed to be an introduction to ancient magic, but it's written in runes."

"Really?" Row looked interested. "I think Hermione is going to take runes as one of her electives next year. Are you going to take it too?"

"Yeah," Harry nodded. "I'm thinking Ancient Runes and Arithmancy. I haven't read any good beginner books on either of those, and they look much more worthwhile than the other options."

"So basically you're going to be bored out of your mind in most of your classes," Row smirked.

"Probably," Harry shrugged. "Maybe I'll get a couple of the professors to work with me on an independent study type of deal. Although, that would probably bring some unwanted attention, so maybe not."

"Why don't you see if you can get into 6th or 7th years classes for charms and defense?"

Harry leaned back in thought for a moment before answering.

"If I can keep most of my skills secret, I'll have an advantage if someone decides to move against me," Harry replied slowly. "I can always reveal my extra knowledge later, so I'd rather keep it secret at first so I can see what Hogwarts has in store for me."

Row looked at him oddly. "You're really paranoid, you know that right?"

"I am what I am," Harry shrugged. "It's the only reason I'm still around."

Row continued to look at him with a frown before deciding to change the subject.

"What house do you think you'll be in?" She asked.

“Hmm, that’s a good question,” Harry said thoughtfully. “Dumbledore said my parents were in Gryffindor, so I’m sure that’s where everybody expects me to end up. Of course, with my luck I’ll end up in Slytherin.”

Row wrinkled her nose. “That would suck. On the bright side, maybe you could beat some sense into a few of them.”

“Maybe,” Harry chuckled. “So, are you ready for some wandless practice, or has Hogwarts made you soft?”

Row took a deep breath and made herself comfortable.

“Ok, let’s go.”

True to his word, Harry spent the next two weeks reading and practicing potions from the first and second year curriculum. Between studying, going to the dojo with Jack, and practicing wandless magic with Row, time passed quickly for Harry and before he knew it the day he was schedule to meet Remus Lupin had arrived.

“You’re meeting at the Leaky Cauldron?”

“Yeah, then we’ll probably go to someplace in regular London,” Harry said as he checked his glamour in the mirror.

“You’re not going to apparate directly there, are you?” Asked a concerned Row.

“Not directly, no,” Harry replied. “I found an alley that’s about a block away and I’m going to apparate there. I seriously doubt that they’ll be an auror trap there, in any case.”

Satisfied, Row wished him luck and Harry promptly apparated to the alley and made his way up the street to the Leaky Cauldron.

He’d been given only a brief description of the man he was supposed to meet, the most important detail being that he would be wearing a

cloak with a gold phoenix embroidered on the breast. Harry spotted him almost immediately in the empty pub, and made his way over.

“Remus Lupin?”

Lupin looked at the young man in front of him in astonishment before remembering that he was disguised.

“That’s me,” he replied with a small smile. “Shall we be off?”

Harry nodded and led the way outside. Once they were safely away from the pub, he hailed a cab and the two of them headed to a small café. When they were seated, Lupin gave Harry an odd look.

“The headmaster warned me that you’d be under a glamour, but I must say it’s still rather strange,” he said with a chuckle.

“What were you expecting, Mr. Lupin?”

“Honestly, I thought you’d look like your father, right down the mop he called hair,” Lupin replied. “And please, call me Remus.”

“You were one of the people my parents wanted to be my guardian, right?” Harry asked, Lupin nodded. “What happened?”

Lupin fidgeted in his seat before looking back at Harry.

“Harry, I have a rather, uh, delicate condition,” he began cautiously. “It’s a very serious magical malady, serious enough that the Ministry of Magic passed a law stating that anyone with my..affliction..cannot legally raise children.”

“Well, that clears it up,” said Harry sarcastically.

Lupin cringed. “I’m sorry I can’t be more specific, but-”

“It’s ok,” Harry said, cutting him off. “I understand. Some secrets have to be kept.”

Lupin eyed him shrewdly but nodded. Harry considered him carefully before carefully phrasing his next question.

“Did the headmaster want you to talk to me about anything special?”

As Lupin began to answer, Harry entered his mind. He had asked that question specifically, hoping to get Lupin thinking of any conversations he and Dumbledore had concerning Harry. Almost immediately, a memory floated into his mind.

“Just tell him a little about his parents’ days at Hogwarts,” Dumbledore was saying. “How they met and how much they enjoyed themselves. He will want to connect with his parents, Remus, and he can only do that at Hogwarts.” He finished twinkling.

“Anything else, headmaster?”

Dumbledore paused. “He does not need to know everything yet. It is important to keep the conversation positive, so do not tell him about Sirius’s betrayal, that time will come later. Our first priority is to bring him firmly back into our world, Remus.”

Harry pulled himself out of the memory and realized that Lupin was still speaking.

“...questions about your parents, I’ll try to answer them.”

“Who were my parents’ other friends, the ones that died in the war?”

A dark shadow seemed to pass over Lupin’s face, which did not go unnoticed by Harry. Tentatively, he extended his leglimency just enough to read surface emotions.

“Our other friends’ names were Sirius and Peter. They were good friends, and I still miss them.”

Harry could tell that what he was saying was only half-true, but he couldn’t tell which part. Shrugging, he asked Lupin to tell him some stories of his parents’ days at Hogwarts.

Over the next hour, Harry grew increasingly frustrated. Everything Lupin said was true, strictly speaking, and yet Harry knew for a fact

that he was hiding something major. He was considering risking a full leglimency assault when Lupin abruptly got up looking at his watch.

"I'm sorry to leave you Harry, but I have to be back at Hogwarts soon."

"That's ok, Remus," Harry replied, hiding his frustration. "What's at Hogwarts, if you don't mind me asking?"

Remus paused before giving Harry a small smile.

"Well, I guess it wouldn't hurt to tell you," he began. "I'm the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

"Are you really?" Asked Harry, interested. "Well, according to my sister, the last teacher didn't leave you much to work with. I'll look forward to your class."

"Thanks Harry," said Remus with a kind smile. "If you'd like, I'd be happy to meet with you again. Maybe I could bring some of my old photos along..." he trailed off.

"I'd like that, Professor. Until then."

The two parted ways as Remus made his way to the apparition point by the Leaky Cauldron and Harry ducked into a deserted alley. Giving the alley a final glance for bystanders, he disappeared silently and reappeared in his room. Throwing his coat on the bed, he made his way to the kitchen.

"Hey Harry," Row greeted him from the living room. "How'd it go?"

"Well, he really did know my parents, that much was true," Harry replied as he made himself a sandwich. "But I caught a glimpse of Dumbledore telling him not to tell me everything, and he mentioned something about one of my dad's friends betraying him. I was trying to get more out of him the whole time, but all I could get was the sense that he was hiding something big, and that it still hurt him to think about it."

“What do you think it was?”

“Well,” Harry looked thoughtfully at his sister. “Honestly, I think it’s just more half truths designed to get me feeling good about Hogwarts. Something bad obviously happened and they don’t want me to know about it in case I change my mind.”

“Why didn’t you just break into his mind and find it that way?”

“I didn’t want to risk it,” Harry replied. “The deeper I go, the more likely it is he’ll catch me. He’s obviously not an occlumens, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t know what leglimency feels like. Plus if he caught me then he’d tell Dumbledore and that would bring a lot of questions I don’t want to answer yet.”

“So you can’t trust this Remus guy then?” Row asked sadly.

“Not completely,” Harry answered. “He seems to genuinely care about me though, and I know he cared about my parents. I guess I understand that he wouldn’t want to talk about his dead friends, but it still irks me that they’re trying to keep me in the dark.”

“Just give it some time, Harry,” Row replied thoughtfully. “They’ll come around.”

“Maybe.” Harry just shrugged and sat down to eat his lunch.

Malfoy Manor

Lucius Malfoy was sitting down to tea when his fire abruptly flared green and Severus Snape stepped out.

“Severus, to what do I owe the pleasure?” He asked silkily.

“Lucius,” Snape nodded. “I have a rather interesting situation and am in need of your...assistance.” At Malfoy’s nod he continued. “You have no doubt been informed about the incident at Hogwarts regarding Miss Rowena Thomas.”

Malfoy's eyes flashed in anger before he resumed his cool expression. "Your niece, I believe."

Snape looked shocked for a moment and Malfoy chuckled.

"Come now, Severus, I am nothing if not well informed."

Snape inclined his head in agreement and continued.

"It has recently come to my attention that Miss Thomas is currently living under the muggle guardianship of her squib brother." Malfoy's face contorted in disgust. "I quite agree, I assure you. I was hoping to secure a more... suitable magical guardian for her, without attracting unnecessary attention."

"A guardian like yourself perhaps?" Malfoy asked with a small smirk. Snape scowled. "Relax, Severus, your attitude towards children is well known. I am quite amused every time Draco mentions Professor Snape." He chuckled. "Of course, I'm sure the minister would understand the need for a change in Miss Thomas's guardianship. He is of a similar opinion on such matters, after all. Such things do take time, however."

"Of course," Snape replied smoothly. "She will be at Hogwarts for most of the year anyway. That should allow plenty of time to find a suitable replacement."

"Of course," Malfoy nodded. "Well, with the proper motivation, I'm sure we could have this matter settled sometime around the New Year. Would that be satisfactory, Severus?"

Snape smirked.

"Quite."

A/N You didn't think Snape was going out like a chump, did you? I hate the guy, but he's not a Slytherin for nothing.

Next chapter there's a few more things to wrap up and then Harry heads to Hogwarts. Then the real fun begins...

It was a full six days later that Harry received his next letter from Dumbledore.

Dear Mr. Potter,

I am glad to hear that you will be ready to attend classes with your fellow third year students. I would still like to meet with you regarding the progress you have made on your own, and would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

I must admit that I am rather curious about your latest inquiry, as ward-casting is not a part of the traditional Hogwarts curriculum. I'm afraid that even the simplest wards would prove too difficult with you at this point in your magical education, however I should be happy to arrange for you to learn when you are older. If there is a specific area that you need warded, I would be happy to assist you personally.

Remus Lupin recently suggested that you could benefit from a tour of Hogwarts before the coming school year. As this year's Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, he has kindly offered to be your guide and I think it is a splendid idea. I should very much like to meet you in person, and I'm sure Fawkes would like to see you again as well. You need only tell us what day you would like to come and the castle will be at your disposal.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

"Shorter than usual," Harry snorted as he handed the letter over to Row.

"Why'd you ask him about ward-casting?" She asked, looking up quizzically.

"I figured it was worth a shot," Harry shrugged. "Once I'm at Hogwarts I'm sure I'll be in the wizard papers, and I was hoping to have some security for the flat when that happens. From the little bits I've read, there are some really powerful wards out there."

Row frowned. "You think that's going to be a problem?"

"Honestly, I 'm surprised it isn't a problem already," Harry replied. "If Dumbledore wasn't trying to keep it quiet, we'd probably be swimming in owls. Don't worry, I've got a backup plan. I just hope it works out."

Row just nodded and went back to her charms book while Harry made his way over to the training area.

"Whatcha working on?" Asked Jack as he came out of his bedroom.

"Just an idea I've been trying," said Harry as he warmed up with a few curses.

"What's the idea?"

"I'm trying to cast more than one spell at a time," Harry replied as he continued to warm up.

"Wait," said a confused Jack. "I thought you could already do that, one from each hand right?"

Harry frowned. "Wait, that's not right. I guess what I'm really trying to do is cast one spell, but aim it at multiple targets so it acts like multiple spells. So I'd be able to hit two different things with a spell I cast from one hand."

Row looked up from her book and whistled. "How are you gonna manage that?"

"Well, I haven't yet," Harry replied wryly. "Scorched my whole arm up pretty good the last time I tried, and that was just using the disarming charm. Still, it would be a big advantage, especially if I could learn to do it with high powered spells."

"Expelliarmus? That's not a curse."

Harry frowned again. "It feels like one though." He replied thoughtfully. "It creates a specific beam of magic that has to connect with the

target to be effective. The same is true for nearly all curses. Charms, on the other hand, are much more indirect magically in that I don't have to hit something with a spell to levitate it; I can just do it."

"What about hexes and jinxes?"

Harry paused for a moment before answering.

"Actually, hexes might be easier. They seem to be a cross between charms and curses, so maybe I should try that first. Thanks Row!" He smiled.

"You can thank me all you want, but I still don't understand exactly what you're trying to do."

Harry looked thoughtful. "I guess what I'm really trying to do is cast curses without without a specific emanating focus, that way I can split the effects and I'm not limited to my 2 hands."

"You know that's supposed to be impossible, right? You'd have to create an entirely new spell." Asked Row skeptically.

Harry's brow furrowed. "Well, I can already do a bunch of charms at the same time, and for the most part I don't even need to gesture with my hands anymore. If I don't need my hands to cast some spells, why should I need them for curses?" Row looked confused so he elaborated. "When I cast a curse, I use my hand like a wand, right?" She nodded. "But why does it have to be my hand? It's not like my hand has special properties like a wand does, so why can't I shoot a curse from elbow, or my shoulder, or anywhere else? What's the difference?"

"Harry, what the hell are you talking about?"

"Think about it this way," Harry levitated Row a foot in the air and then set her back down. "I just cast a spell on you, right?" Row gave him an odd look but nodded. "So I hit you with a spell without throwing any kind of magic at you from my wand, hand, or anything else. I simply focused on levitating you and it happened. So why can I

do that with some spells and not with others? What's to say I can't do exactly the same thing with a stunner?"

"I'm still confused. When you levitate something, you concentrate your magic on the correct charm and send it to the object; that's what Professor Flitwick said. If you focus correctly on the process of the charm and its desired effect, and if you focus enough power through your wand, the spell is successful."

Harry frowned at her. "I think Hogwarts is brainwashing you. Remember when you first learned wandless magic? How did you feel then?"

"I didn't really know what I was doing then," Row replied. "You told me to focus on what I wanted to happen, so I did, and sometimes it happened. Honestly, it's a lot easier when you know all the steps involved like I do now."

Harry shook his head. "I don't think it's that simple or straightforward. I've already found different ways to cast some of the same spells, and I didn't need a wand. I think using a wand has narrowed your thinking. Think about this: complex wandless magic is supposed to be impossible, but you've seen me do it. How do you know they're not wrong about this too?"

Row could only reply with a skeptical shrug and shake of her head as Harry turned back to begin his practice.

The rest of July passed quickly, and before he knew it, Harry's birthday had arrived. He had declined Dumbledore's offer of a tour of Hogwarts, but agreed to meet with Lupin again on the first of August. It was therefore a surprise when a Hogwarts school owl landed in front of him with a parcel tied to its leg.

"What in the world..." Harry muttered to himself as he took the package and read the note attached to it.

Dear Harry,

Your father left this is my possession for safekeeping, and I am glad to finally have the opportunity to return it to you. Use it well.

Albus Dumbledore

Somewhat bewildered, Harry opened the package and pulled out a silvery invisibility cloak.

“Woa, cool!” Exclaimed Jack when he saw. “Who sent you that?”

“Dumbledore,” Harry answered. “He said it was my dad’s.” Suddenly he chuckled. “Pretty worthless for me though, don’t you think?”

Jack’s brow furrowed in confusion before he snorted in realization.

“Well, at least that means he doesn’t know about your invisibility,” supplied Row helpfully.

“I guess,” Harry snorted. “Actually, this works out pretty well,” he said, tossing the cloak to Row. “Now you can sneak around just as effectively as I can.”

“R-Really Harry? Are you sure?” Asked Row with wide eyes.

“Positive,” Harry replied with a nod. “It’s not like I need it, and this way if we’re in different houses you can sneak out without me if you need to.”

Row squealed in delight and threw her arms around Harry.

“Only you would give somebody else a gift on your birthday, Harry,” Jack said laughing. Harry just shrugged on moved on to his other presents.

The next day Harry met Lupin at the same outdoor café, and immediately he noticed that the man was nervous.

“Hello, Harry,” Lupin greeted him as he sat down. “I’ve got a bit of bad news for you. Have you seen the daily prophet lately?”

"No..." Harry shook his head cautiously.

"Well, I guess you'd best read it for yourself." Lupin handed him the previous day's edition of the paper and opened it. The headline read:

HARRY POTTER FOUND! WILL ATTEND HOGWARTS
SEPTEMBER 1

By Dominique Roark

Sources at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry have confirmed that Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived and defeater of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has officially enrolled for the Fall term. Although it is still unknown where the Boy-Who-Lived has been hiding in recent years, Albus Dumbledore, current headmaster of Hogwarts, released a statement yesterday stating that Mr. Potter will starting with his fellow third year students for the coming year.

"I am very pleased that Mr. Potter has found his way back to us," the headmaster said. "Let us make every effort to welcome him back warmly."

There has been much discussion about the possible whereabouts of Mr. Potter, including numerous reports including...

"Well, I guess the cat's out of that bag, then," Harry said with a scowl.

"It was bound to happen eventually, Harry," Lupin replied carefully. "The headmaster is doing everything he can to keep you hidden from the press, but he couldn't keep this quiet forever. The prophet threatened to break the story with or without him, so he gave them a statement."

"Yeah, I knew it would be out eventually," said Harry with a sigh. "I don't have to like it though."

Lupin smiled ruefully. "No, I suppose you don't. On the bright side, at least Albus has been able to keep your two friends out of it."

“My brother and sister, you mean,” Harry corrected him sharply.

“Of course,” said Lupin quickly. “Now, where did we leave off last time?”

The rest of their meeting continued much the same as the first, with Lupin answering Harry’s questions and Harry trying unsuccessfully to find what Lupin was hiding. Finally, Harry decided to try a more direct approach.

“Remus, I know you mentioned that your other two friends’ names were Sirius and Peter, and that they died in the war. I was wondering if you knew how they died, or who killed them. Did it have anything to do with my parents?” As he finished, Harry risked a slightly stronger legilimency probe, and finally hit something.

“James and Lily are dead, Remus,” said Dumbledore sadly. “Sirius sold them to Voldemort and he attacked them last night.”

“N-no,” Remus choked. “It can’t be...”

“Harry, are you listening?”

“What? Oh, I’m sorry Remus,” said Harry with a fake smile. “I was thinking about that damn article.”

“Understandable,” Remus replied kindly. “I was saying that we don’t really have details on how they died, only that they were killed by Death Eaters.”

You’re lying. “Hmm, I see,” Harry replied. “Just out of curiosity, what was Sirius’s last name?”

Remus choked on his tea and looked at Harry oddly before answering.

“Black. Sirius Black.”

“Thanks, Remus. And thanks for bringing the pictures, too. It’s nice to finally be able to put a face to my parents.”

Remus smiled.

"Anytime, Harry. My door is always open."

After leaving Remus, Harry apparated home and flopped into a chair to brood.

"Who died?" Jack asked jokingly when he saw him.

"My parents and all their friends, actually," Harry snapped. "And even better, no one will give me a straight answer about how."

Jack's face fell. "Sorry mate," he said seriously. "You want to talk about it?"

"No, there's nothing to say really," Harry replied. "Just one more thing to find out about when I get to Hogwarts, I guess."

Jack looked like he thinking hard about something before he suddenly looked at Harry with a very serious expression.

"Harry, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," Harry answered, a little confused.

"Aren't you worried that somebody is going to find out what you did to your uncle? A wizard, I mean. Dumbledore knows about the cupboard already, what if they find him?"

Harry shook his head. "They won't, I took care of that when I told my aunt to file the emancipation forms," he replied. "And she still can't tell anybody. The only way they could find out is if somebody forcibly removed the block I put on her using legilimency, and they wouldn't even know there was a block until they were already in. Trust me, I've already thought about it."

Jack nodded, but still looked unconvinced.

"Well, if you want to talk about anything you know where to find me."

"Thanks," Harry replied before jumping to his feet. "I think I'm going to get some practice in, actually. Clear my mind a little."

"That's cool. Row and I are going to the cinema later, you want to go?"

"No thanks," said Harry, waving his hand dismissively. "I'm not in the mood."

Jack nodded his understanding and left the room as Harry grabbed a practice sword and began to work.

Harry spent the first week of August continuing through the second year potions curriculum. Overall, he found the material rather simplistic, and had no trouble with the few potions that he tried on his own. He was just about to dispose of a perfect swelling solution when something on the TV caught his ear.

"Hey Jack, turn that up."

"....I repeat. There is a convict on the loose by the name of Sirius Black, shown here. He is wanted in connection with over a dozen murders, and is considered armed and extremely dangerous. If you have any information....."

"What is it, Harry? Yo, Harry! HARRY!"

"I fucking KNEW IT!" Harry exclaimed angrily. The television screen promptly exploded, causing Jack to dive behind the sofa to avoid being hit.

Harry closed his eyes and quickly regained control of his emotions before waving his hand to fix the TV.

"Uh, want to tell me what that was all about, mate?" Said Jack as he cautiously poked his head up from behind the sofa.

“Sirius Black is the person that betrayed my parents, the one I just found out about from Remus Lupin. They told me was dead,” Harry said, fighting to keep his tone even. “I knew they were hiding something, but I thought it was just the fact that he was a traitor before he died. Of course, it makes sense now: they didn’t want to tell me because he’s still alive, just in prison.”

“You think it’s the same bloke?” Asked Jack skeptically. Harry nodded.

“I’m almost positive. The last time we met, Remus showed me some pictures of my parents and their gang at Hogwarts. That was obviously an old picture, but it’s definitely the same guy.”

“And now he’s escaped?” Asked Jack worriedly. “Hang on, if he was a wizard how come he escaped from a normal prison?”

“I don’t know,” Harry replied. “Maybe they put him in a regular jail because he got caught by muggles. Or maybe he was in the wizard prison, but he broke out and now they can’t find him, so they got the government to help look.”

“You don’t think it has anything to do with you, do you?”

“I don’t know,” said Harry slowly, before his jaw clenched in anger. “But I’ve got some letters to write.”

Professors Dumbledore and Lupin,

I am most interested to hear how it is that Sirius Black, who you have both assured me is dead, has recently become a wanted fugitive after a daring prison break last week. Don’t bother trying to tell me that it is a different man; I saw his picture on the local news and it is most certainly the same man I remember from the photos Remus showed me. You’ll have to try something else.

I am quite sure that you will discuss this with each other before returning my letter, so I am addressing this to both of you. Hopefully it

will save you some time in coming up with another of your half-true stories designed to keep me in the dark.

Harry Potter

Harry attached the letter to Hedwig's leg and watched her go with an angry smirk.

Let's see them weasel their way out of this one.

As Harry expected, the reply that he got two days later was carefully worded and quite apologetic.

Dear Mr. Potter,

I fear that once again I must apologize, Harry. I had intended to tell you the full story of Sirius Black and your parents face to face once you came to Hogwarts. I never intended to lie to you, Harry, and I certainly was not trying to deliberately keep you uninformed. Please forgive me.

As you now know, Sirius Black is indeed alive. At the height of his power, Lord Voldemort was known to specifically target certain families that were publicly opposed to him. Through various intelligence gathering efforts, we were alerted that he had chosen to target your parents for just such a reason. Believing that we had found out in time, your parents took you into hiding using something called the Fidelius Charm. Basically, the charm is used to hide something from all but one other person, that person is known as the secret keeper. Only the secret keeper can reveal the hidden location, and thus it seemed like the perfect way to safely hide your family.

You parents, James and Lily, chose Sirius Black to be their secret keeper. Unfortunately, Sirius had, unbeknownst to us, been working for Voldemort for some time. He revealed that your parents had gone into hiding at Godric's Hollow, and Voldemort attacked shortly thereafter. The rest you know.

After that horrible night, Peter Pettigrew went after Sirius Black and confronted him in muggle London. After a brief altercation, Black killed him as well as 12 innocent muggles before he was apprehended and sent to Azkaban to serve a life sentence. He escaped from Azkaban earlier this month and the Ministry has asked the muggle government for their help locating him.

This is the full story Harry, I have left nothing out. Please accept my sincerest apologies for my oversight in not telling you directly; I simply did not want you to have to deal with such unpleasant thoughts until you were ready.

As it stands, you must be very careful, Harry. Sirius Black is known to have been one of the strongest supporters of Lord Voldemort after he betrayed your parents, and it is quite possible that he will come after you if given the chance. It may become necessary to move you to a more secure location before term begins. I will keep you notified if I hear anything more.

Also, you must forgive Remus Lupin for not telling you; he was only acting on my advice. Once again, I sincerely apologize Harry.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Harry could feel cold ire build in him as he read the letter. When he was done, he crumpled it in his fist with all his strength.

“Harry...?” Asked a concerned Row. “What’s going on?”

Realizing he’d just demolished the letter, he attempted to smooth it out and handed it to Row.

“What are you thinking, Harry?” She asked softly when she had finished.

“I don’t know, exactly,” Harry answered honestly. “I know I’m not going to any ‘secure location,’ though.”

“What if he finds you though?” Asked a frightened Row.

Harry eyes flashed and Row could feel the raw power flowing around him.

“Let him.”

In the weeks that followed Sirius Black’s escape, Harry redoubled his training efforts in defense, reviewing all the material he’d already covered and thinking about how he would use it against a dark wizard. He had made some progress on his idea with hexes, but he was still unable to get the desired effect with curses or anything remotely powerful. His progress with conjuring was similarly slow, and he began to wonder if advanced transfiguration was a subject that was simply beyond him. Worse, he still didn’t have another wizard to actually practice his magical shields against, although Row had promised that she would help him as soon as they reached Hogwarts and she could use her wand again.

Harry was also increasingly pressured by Dumbledore and Lupin to relocate to a safer location. Since his initial polite refusal had thus far been ignored, Harry sent his first ever howler to the headmaster stating in no uncertain terms that he would not be leaving his family, no matter how ‘unsafe’ it might be. Thankfully, loud words seemed to accomplish what polite words had not, and Harry heard nothing more from either Dumbledore or Lupin for the rest of the summer. Training had always been rather relaxing for Harry, as it required him to clear his mind of extraneous thoughts. This left him in a better mood than normal despite the Black factor, and he found himself quite enjoying the relative peace. He had even spent a number of nights out on the town with Jack, who was much more fun to be around now that his girlfriend was on vacation.

It was therefore rather depressing when Harry awoke on the morning of August 31, knowing without a doubt that today was the day that all that would end.

Row had jokingly dubbed it his “coming out day,” and refused to refer to it as anything else for the better part of a month. Once Jack noticed that the term annoyed Harry, he took to using it every chance he got as well.

But regardless of what they called it, one thing was certain: August 31st was the day that Harry Potter would rejoin the magical world.

He had originally got the idea from Lupin when he mentioned that many witches and wizards would need some time to get used to the idea that the Boy-Who-Lived, their hero, was back among them. Lupin had mentioned it as a way of hopefully persuading Harry to come on a tour of Hogwarts, but Row had immediately thought of a much better place for him to reveal himself: Diagon Alley. After all, it was well known that the majority of Hogwarts students left their school shopping until the last possible moment, and Diagon Alley was the only place they went to get their supplies. Of course, this also meant that Row could introduce Harry to her friends, which she conveniently decided not to mention.

And so it came to be that, for the first time since he escaped the Dursley house, Harry Potter walked the streets of London looking only like himself, without any type of illusion or disguise.

As Row practically drug him into the Leaky Cauldron, Harry couldn't help feeling almost naked without a disguise, and his hand moved to cover his scar almost instinctively. Catching himself angrily, he took a deep breath and purposely blew his hair out of the way, revealing his scar in all its glory.

Almost on cue, furious whispers started up around him and grew into excited chatter as the pub's patrons scrutinized the young man in the doorway. Eventually, an old woman worked up the courage to approach him and offered her hand.

“It's an honor to meet you Mr. Potter,” she said shyly.

Harry barely had time to digest the fact that a woman easily 3 times his age was looking at him like a schoolgirl before he was suddenly swamped by well wishers offering thanks and congratulations. He

humored them with a handshake and a polite smile, but was careful to move around enough that he was never surrounded. When the crowd had finally parted, he made his way over to the entrance to Diagon Alley and found Jack and Row already waiting for him.

"I think that old lady has a crush on you," Jack whispered jokingly as Row tapped the bricks in the correct order.

"I think one of the guy's did, too," Harry muttered back. Jack laughed.

Together they entered the alley and followed Row as she led them towards Florean's ice cream parlor. As they got closer, a small group of girls sitting outside noticed their approach and waved to Row.

"Hey guys," Row greeted them before turning to her brothers. "Jack, Harry," she said, gesturing to the three girls sitting at the table. "These are my friends Hermione, Sarah, and Padma. Guys, these are the brothers you've heard so much about, Jack and Harry."

"Hello," Harry said, inwardly amused by their gobsmacked expressions.

"H-Harry Potter?" Stuttered Padma. "Your brother Harry, the one you can't shut up about, is actually HARRY POTTER!"

Harry groaned as Padma's outburst inevitably drew glances from all around them.

"Padma! Shh!" Row hissed sharply. "This is the surprise I told you about. Yes, Harry Potter is my brother."

"You really are coming to Hogwarts this year then?" Asked a curious Sarah. "I saw it in the paper, but..." she trailed off.

Harry nodded, and turned to look at Hermione, who immediately dropped her gaze.

"What is it?" He asked, curious.

"Nothing," Hermione said quickly. Seeing he didn't believe her, she said hesitantly, "it's just, I've read about you. Everybody thought you'd been kidnapped, but you couldn't have been if you're the brother that Row talks about."

"Told you she was the smart one," Row chuckled. "He's not my real brother, of course. But he, Jack, and I have been living together since before I came to Hogwarts. Jack's actually our guardian, if you can believe that one."

"Huh, what?" Jack said, breaking his gaze away from a group of giggling seventh year girls.

"See?" Row chuckled. "Doesn't miss a thing." The rest of the girls joined in her laughter.

"So Harry," questioned Padma, regaining her composure. "Are you here to get your school supplies?"

"No, I already bought everything I'll need."

"He's just here to show off," Row joked, giving him a nudge.

"More like be shown off," Harry grumbled. In the short time that they had been talking, a small crowd had already gathered half a block away.

"Row, there you are!" Came a voice from behind them. "I was wondering if you'd be here, and- EEP!" Ginny Weasley cut off abruptly when her eyes landed on Harry.

"Ginny, I'd like you to meet my brother Harry."

Ginny just stood there, speechless, before turning frantically to Row and then to Hermione, her face flushed.

"We didn't know either. She just kind of sprung it on all of us." Hermione said, shooting Row and annoyed look.

Harry, meanwhile, had been subtly probing Ginny's mind for any trace of Tom Riddle and his diary. Finding none, he relaxed and shook Ginny's hand.

"It's nice to meet you, as well." He said. Ginny had almost managed to form a response when she was approached from behind by a large group of redheads.

"There you are, Ginny dear. You ran off so suddenly that I was worried," Molly Weasley gently chastised. "Now then, you must be Rowena Thomas," she said, engulfing the girl in a hug. "We looked for you on the platform but Ginny said you'd already left. We can't thank you enough for saving our little girl. OH! My word, are you Harry Potter?"

Harry sighed. "That I am."

"He's Row's brother," blurted Ginny, who finally got her voice to work.

"Are you really?" Asked Arthur Weasley. "Well, that explains where she gets her courage, eh? You certainly caused quite the disturbance with your disappearance Mr. Potter. You've been with Miss Thomas and her parents then?"

"She doesn't have parents, dad," Ginny practically hissed. "I told you, she lives with her older brother Jack."

"All three of you without a parent?" Molly Weasley looked scandalized. "Surely you must have someone who looks out for you!"

"We look out for each other, actually," Jack said, cutting into the conversation. "Although technically I'm their guardian as an emancipated minor, I hardly consider myself a parent."

"We sure don't!" Row joked.

"But you're so young! It's simply not right, you must have someone who can help you, an aunt or uncle maybe?"

"We're quite happy as we are, actually," replied Harry evenly. "There's no need for worry, we get along quite well." Jack and Row smiled and nodded.

"Well, it's certainly a pleasure to meet you both," said Arthur, cutting off his wife's response.

"A pleasure to meet you as well," replied Harry politely. He noticed that the rest of the red headed family was closing in and smoothly side stepped as one started to approach. The lack of personal space was starting to alarm him slightly.

Jack saw Harry's demeanor begin to change and decided to intervene.

"Hey, Harry, don't we have to go to the bank?" He asked.

Harry shot him a grateful look before replying.

"Actually, we do." He turned to Row. "Jack I have to take care of something right now, so why don't you stay with your friends and we'll meet back at the bookstore?"

Row looked at him quizzically but nodded. Molly Weasley started to protest but Harry quickly separated himself from the group and walked towards Gringotts.

"Looked like you could use a little help there," Jack chuckled.

"Yeah, I can't stand feeling trapped," Harry replied.

"So, what do we have to do at the bank, anyway? Or did you just tell me that earlier so that I could use it as a diversion?"

"No, we really do have business. It's secret though, so you'll have to wait."

"Ok," Jack just shrugged and followed Harry into the white building.

When they emerged half an hour later, Jack had disbelieving smile on his face.

“You need to see a shrink, mate,” he said with a laugh. “You’ve got issues. Is there a plan C too? Plan D maybe?”

“It’s really not that big a deal,” Harry replied, annoyed. “It’s just a precaution, and you already agreed.”

Jack just shook his head in amusement as the two made their way to Flourish and Blott’s.

Just like everywhere else they had been that morning, Flourish and Blott’s was packed with Hogwarts students, and it wasn’t long until Harry was recognized. After another round of exchanging handshakes and smiles with blushing teenagers, they finally found Row.

“There you guys are,” she said as they approached. “You know I’ve had 6 different people in here come up asking me what it feels like to be related to Rowena Ravenclaw? I think I’m starting to understand how you feel, Harry.”

“Don’t forget the guy that wanted to know what the basilisk really looked like,” piped up Sarah from behind her.

“Oh yeah,” Row rolled her eyes, then she giggled. “I told him it was classified by the Ministry. He ate it up.”

“Can we go someplace else now?” Jack asked, eyeing the store warily. “Too many books in here.” Row rolled her eyes again.

“Yeah, I was going to walk down the rest of the Alley and then head back,” Harry replied. “I think enough people have seen me already, at least enough students that I won’t be mobbed on the train tomorrow.”

“Is that why you decided to come?” Asked Hermione questioningly.

Harry shrugged. “Well, I had to go to the bank anyway, and I didn’t like the idea of just suddenly appearing at Hogwarts. I’m also

expecting that they'll be reporters here pretty soon, so I can get that out of the way as well. Something tells me I'm going to have enough to deal with without worrying about them," he finished under his breath. Hermione looked at him quizzically before quickly averting her gaze.

Harry's assumptions proved true when he was abruptly assaulted by a group of reporters as he passed Eyelop's Owl Emporium.

"Mr. Potter, are you excited to be coming back to the magical world?"

"Mr. Potter, where have you been all these years? Is it true you were kidnapped?"

"Mr. Potter, there have been reports that Minister Fudge has been using you to train his own private army, would you care to comment?"

"Mr. Potter, is it true that Sirius Black broke out of prison to kill you? How does that make you feel?"

"What the hell kind of a question is that?" Harry blurted before he could stop himself. Shaking his head to clear it, he held up his hand for silence and formulated his answer.

"I don't have a lot of time, but I'll do my best to answer your questions. First, I am excited about going to Hogwarts, and I look forward to learning more about the magical world. Second, I was not kidnapped, I ran away from home when I was younger and I didn't get my Hogwarts letter until this year. Third, I have never met Minister Fudge and I have no idea what you are talking about. Fourth, I really don't know anything about Sirius Black or why he broke out of prison, so I don't know what to tell you. That's all, thank you."

Ignoring the reporters' shouts, he turned on his heel and walked over to the nearest store where he found Jack and Row browsing.

"Ok, I'm ready to go when you are." He said as he came up behind them.

“Uh, it looks like they have some more questions,” said Jack, pointing at the reporters that were once again waiting outside the store. Harry sighed.

“Well, we have to leave sometime, and something tells me they’re going to be there for a while.”

Jack just shrugged as he followed Harry out of the store and back up the street. As they walked, the reporters continued to take pictures and fire questions, but Harry just ignored them. When they reached the entrance to the Leaky Cauldron, the reporters finally gave up and left to write up their stories.

When the three were finally safe in a taxi on their way home, Harry let out a relieved sigh.

“Well,” Row said brightly. “I think that went rather well.”

September 1st dawned dark and cloudy over London, and by the time Row and Harry were set to leave for King’s Cross Station the city was on the brink of an all-out storm.

“Well, I guess this is it,” said Jack a little sadly. “I guess I’ll just have to throw a few wild parties to make up for you guys leaving me all alone.” He finished with a grin.

“Prat.” Row said, hitting him on the arm before giving him a hug. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too,” Jack replied sincerely before giving Harry a manly handshake. “Of course, I guess I don’t have to worry about you getting into trouble this year.”

“That would be Harry’s department,” Row replied with a smirk. Jack snorted.

Harry smiled as well before he looked up at the sky.

“Does anybody else think it’s a bad sign that the day I go to Hogwarts is the same day that a big storm rolls in?”

“Oh, hush,” Row replied, but her smile betrayed her. “Let’s go or we’ll be late.”

Harry nodded and lifted both their trunks before giving Jack one last look.

“Remember the plan,” he said. Jack rolled his eyes and nodded.

“I remember, now go learn some magic!”

Shaking his head, Harry carried both trunks down to the taxi waiting on the street.

“You think we can trust him not to burn the place down?” Row asked as the taxi pulled away from the curb.

Harry shrugged. “Who knows? As long as he doesn’t shag Christy on my bed, I’ll probably forgive him.”

Row burst out laughing.

“Harry, that is the funniest thing you’ve ever said.”

Harry decided not to tell her he was serious.

The two passed the rest of the ride in comfortable silence, both wondering what the Hogwarts Express had in store for them. When they arrived at the station, Harry once again carried both trunks as he followed Row to the magical barrier and through it onto the platform. Almost immediately the whispering began, and Harry quickened his pace so that he could unload the trunks before he got cornered again.

“You can leave the stuff here, Harry,” said Row, gesturing to a pile of Hogwarts trunks. “My friends and I usually have our own compartment, so you can sit with us.”

Harry just nodded and followed Row through the train until she stopped at a compartment occupied by Sarah and Padma.

“Hey guys,” she said, opening the door. “Ok if Harry sits with us?”

Padma snorted like it was a stupid question and Sarah gave a quick nod.

“Thanks,” said Harry as he took a seat next to Row.

“I still can’t believe that one of your famous brothers is actually famous,” said Padma, shooting another awed glance at Harry. “Do you have any idea what a big deal this is going to be?”

“Actually, I was hoping to prevent some of that by going to Diagon Alley yesterday,” Harry replied with a frown.

Padma shook her head. “Trust me, it’s a big deal. I wonder how they’re going to sort you, did they tell you anything?”

“I assume the same way they sort everyone else, I haven’t heard anything different.”

Padma thought about that for a second and was about to reply with the compartment door opened to reveal Hermione. As she closed the door, the train gave a giant lurch forward and they were on their way to Hogwarts.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said as she flopped down next to Padma. “Ginny Weasley just got here, I think she’s looking for you Row.”

“She’s Row’s biggest fan,” Sarah said to Harry. “Not that I don’t understand, mind you, since she did save her life. Speaking of which,” she said, turning to Row. “You never did tell us that whole story.”

Row considered Sarah for a moment before casting a questioning glance at Harry, who shook his head slightly, a gestured that went unnoticed by all except Hermione.

"Sorry, it's like I told you before," Row sighed. "I don't remember the whole thing and even the parts I remember I'm not allowed to talk about."

"One of these days I'm gonna slip you some veritaserum," Sarah grumbled.

"You keep saying that," Padma giggled.

Sarah glared. "You're going into your third year too, right Harry?" She asked, changing the subject.

"Yeah."

"Did you take private lessons to get caught up?" Asked Hermione worriedly.

"Actually, I'm mostly self taught," Harry replied casually. "But I've read the books that have been used for the past two years and I even got permission to practice a bit, so I should be ok."

"You're not the prankster brother, right?" Asked Sarah suspiciously.

Row laughed. "No, that's Jack. I kept meaning to introduce him to the Weasley twins, but their whole family when on summer vacation to Egypt so I didn't get a chance. I would have introduced them in Diagon Alley but I forgot, which is probably a good thing. Harry is actually rather studious."

"Think you've got what it takes to be a Ravenclaw?" Asked a smirking Padma. Harry shrugged.

"No idea. Guess we'll all find out soon enough though."

"You know that everybody assumes you'll be in Gryffindor, right?" Padma pressed.

"Well, my parents were there, so that's understandable," Harry answered. "Who knows? Maybe they're right." He noticed that Row was giggling rather loudly. "What?"

"Oh, nothing," she replied, still grinning. "I was just thinking about what Jack says about assumptions." Harry gave an amused chuckle.

"What does he say?" Asked Hermione.

"Jack says that when you assume, you make an ass out of you and me."

Hermione and Padma immediately rolled their eyes but Sarah just furrowed her brow in confusion.

"I don't get it."

Row opened her mouth to explain it but abruptly stopped when their compartment door was flung open to reveal the sneering face of Draco Malfoy.

"I heard that Harry Potter was in this compartment," he said imperiously, his gaze landing on Harry. "You must be him. Although why you're sitting with these muggle-lovers and mudbloods I don't know. You'll soon- hey, I'm talking to you!" Harry turned while Malfoy was talking and quietly asked Row a question before turning back to the young Slytherin.

"You will not speak of my sister or her friends that way again," Harry said quietly as he fixed Malfoy with a steely gaze.

"Do you know who I am?" Draco bristled. "I'll speak how I want to whom I want. You'll soon find that some wizarding families are better than others, Potter. Hanging around with mudblood whores is – AACK!" Whatever else he had been about to say was abruptly silenced as he found himself suspended in mid-air, clawing at his throat as it was squeezed by an unseen force.

Harry started to stand and approach him but paused as Row grabbed his hand and pressed it to his wand, which he took out and brandished like sword as he rose.

"I don't know who you are, and I don't care," Harry said in a cold hiss, "but if you ever insult my sister or her friends again, you won't live to regret it." He cancelled the asphyxiation hex on Malfoy and let him fall to the ground where he collapsed, gasping for air.

Vincent Crabbe, who had been watching the exchange with a rather dumb look on his face, cracked his knuckles threateningly and advanced on Harry. Across from him, Gregory Goyle did the same.

Moving his murderous gaze off of Malfoy, Harry waved his wand almost lazily and sent Crabbe flying through the hallway directly into Goyle. Unfortunately, Harry had meant to cast the spell as he always did, wandlessly, and had forgotten that he had the wand in his hand. The result was that rather than simply sending the two sprawling onto the floor, Crabbe sped past Harry at a rather alarming speed, hit Goyle, and sent both of them crashing into the side of the compartment two doors away with a vicious THUD.

"Shit," Harry muttered, giving his wand a dirty look. Sensing movement, Harry turned to see Malfoy trying to point his wand at him and promptly hit him with another asphyxiation hex before summoning the boy's wand.

Harry knelt down so that his eyes were level with Malfoy's and waited a moment before cancelling the hex.

"Look at me." He hissed, his voice hard. Hesitantly, Malfoy looked up at him, eyes wide with naked fear. "You do not want me as an enemy," Harry ground out slowly. "Tell all your friends that anyone who insults my sister will answer to me. Now, get your boys and leave, but remember my words. Do you understand?"

Malfoy was literally shaking with fear at the cold fire he saw in Harry's eyes. He nodded dumbly and Harry got up and returned to the compartment, pausing to throw Malfoy's wand at his feet.

Shutting the door to the compartment, he turned to see three awed expressions and one knowing smirk.

"How the hell did you do that?" Asked Sarah, breaking the silence.

“He didn’t even use an incantation,” Padma muttered absently. “And you threw Goyle across the hall like it was nothing. How the hell-“

“You did that without your wand!” Hermione exclaimed, oblivious to the fact that she was interrupting her friend.. “I saw Row give it to you afterwards! And in the hall you cast that choking spell on Malfoy with your hand, I saw you!” The other two girls whipped their gazes to Hermione and then immediately back to Harry. Obviously, they hadn’t noticed the part about the wand.

Harry gave her his best confused look.

“What are you talking about, I had my wand the whole time,” he shot a quick look at Row.

“Yeah, maybe you just didn’t see it,” Row agreed. She gave Hermione a pleading look.

“Yeah, maybe I just couldn’t see it,” Hermione said slowly, giving Row an odd look. “I guess you had to have it to do magic like that anyway. I shouldn’t have blurted it out without thinking first.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Row said, giving her a grateful smile. “I think we were all pretty surprised.”

“How did you know how to do all that, Harry?” Asked Padma. “I mean, you did most of that without an incantation or wand movement. Plus those were some powerful spells.”

Row smirked. “I think you’d better sit down, Harry. We have some explaining to do.”

“It’s not that big a deal,” Harry said, shooting an annoyed look at Row. “I’ve been studying magic for a couple of years already, and I guess I learned how to do some of the spells a little differently than you.”

“How did you do magic without getting caught?” Asked Sarah skeptically. “The ministry tracks our wands, so how did they not catch you?”

"I can't tell you that," Harry replied evenly. "Suffice to say that I've been learning magic for a while and I'll probably be a little ahead of third year in some subjects."

"You'd better drop it Sarah," Row chuckled. "If I know Harry, he's thinking about memory charming all three of you right now."

"I wasn't thinking that," denied Harry, shooting Row an annoyed look. Actually, that was exactly what he was thinking about, but damned if he was going to admit it.

"You can do a memory charm?" Asked Hermione in a high pitched voice. Harry sighed and nodded.

Sarah whistled but Padma looked thoughtful.

"Why would you memory charm us? It's not like it was illegal, and we're not going to tell on you for taking out Malfoy, of all people."

"I wasn't going to memory charm you," said an exasperated Harry. He sighed. "Look, it's not personal or anything, I just don't like people knowing about my personal business. It's like people think that just because I'm Harry Potter, they have the right to know everything that happens in my life. I just like to be careful, that's all. And contrary to what you've heard," he glared at Row. "I'm not in the habit of going around throwing out memory charms."

Row stuck her tongue out at him and Sarah giggled.

"Look, I know we just met," said Padma kindly. "But you're Row's brother and we like you. You can trust us, Harry." The other two girls nodded emphatically.

"We won't say anything you don't want us to," Sarah added.

"You should be careful though," Hermione said quietly. "Malfoy's a nasty person, and he doesn't like to lose."

“He’s one of the Slytherin’s I was telling you about,” Row said helpfully.

“I figured,” Harry said with a shrug before turning to the others. “I don’t like bullies. You might say I hate them, in fact. So I really could care less who he is, he won’t get away with shit like that around me.”

“H-He could get you in trouble though,” Hermione stammered. “His head of house is Professor Snape, and he lets Malfoy get away with anything.”

Harry snorted. “Trust me, they’re not going to expel me. Don’t ask how I know, just, trust me.”

“We will if you will,” Padma said, looking him in the eye.

Sighing, Harry considered the three girls across from him silently. He knew that the incident with the Malfoy boy would likely be all over the train soon, but it couldn’t be helped. Even if everyone found out that his knowledge extended beyond most third years, it wasn’t the end of the world. What worried him the most was that Hermione had seen him doing very advanced wandless magic. If that got out, he could have a real problem.

“Harry doesn’t have that many friends,” Row said, breaking him out of his reverie. “So you’ll have to give him some time.” She turned her gaze to Harry. “They’re great friends, Harry. You really can trust them. I do.” She looked at him earnestly.

“Friends then?” Asked Padma. Harry managed a small smile and nodded. “Great. I have to go find my sister, so I’ll be back in a while.”

Padma left the compartment as Hermione and Sarah started talking about who the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor would be. Row joined in the idle speculation, knowing that Harry would prefer not to reveal that he’d already met the man. After a while, the conversation moved on to include the other classes that they would taking this year, and what they might learn.

After an hour or so, Padma returned the compartment looking annoyed and complaining about her sister.

“Padma’s twin sister is in Gryffindor,” Row told Harry quietly. “She’s a big gossip and a bigger flirt. It’s a wonder that they’re even related, much less twins.”

Harry nodded and was about to go back to his book when the train gave a sudden jerk and began to slow down.

“Hey, why are we stopping?” Asked Sarah in a confused voice.

“I don’t know, we can’t be there yet,” Padma replied slowly. The train slowly ground to a halt and Sarah put her face up against the glass window.

“There’s something getting on board!” She exclaimed, frightened.

Harry was about to tell everyone to calm down when he was struck with a feeling of intense cold, followed by the most horrid sensation he had ever experienced. It felt like his entire body had been immersed in freezing water and no matter how hard he tried, he would never get out.

“Harry, are you ok? And why is it so cold in here?” Asked Row in a small voice.

Fighting the despair that threatened to overtake him, Harry drew his wand and stood in the middle of the compartment.

“S-Something’s coming,” he ground out through gritted teeth. “Behind me, NOW!”

Harry only dimly noticed the girls fall in cowering behind him, for at that exact moment he saw a dark shadow approaching from outside. Slowly, a skeletal hand reached out and the compartment door began to slide open.

By now everyone else in the compartment was under the same mental assault that Harry was, and although he knew it was all in his

mind, his mental defenses seemed ineffective at best. He lashed out with legilimency, but the assault didn't slow. When the door opened fully, Harry felt like he was being pulled into a bottomless pit of despair. He could hear his uncle screaming and felt the blows land all over his body. As he fell deeper, he heard a woman's voice screaming in his head.

NO! No, not Harry! NOO!

At that moment Harry knew that whatever it was that was attacking him, it was winning. He tried desperately to raise his wand, but the woman's screams were growing louder and he could feel himself losing consciousness. He could sense a foul stench in the air as his attacker slowly reached for him. He could feel Row's hand slowly sliding out of his....He could feel her falling....dying....

"NO!"

The word tore from his mouth with a scream so primal it sounded like his entire throat had been ripped out. With one incredible surge, Harry ruthlessly clawed his way out of despair and raised his hands, unleashing two vicious blasting curses that completely obliterated the front wall of the compartment and sent the demon crashing through the window on the other side of the train. Breathing heavily, Harry collapsed onto his knees and fought to stay conscious as his vision swam. He turned slowly to check on the girl's behind him, but stopped abruptly when he felt the cold, empty feeling returning. Stunned, he turned back to see the demon floating slowly towards him looking none the worse for wear. Harry could only briefly register someone else approaching before he felt himself being pulled once more into icy despair and he collapsed, completely exhausted, and knew no more.

A/N Well, damn. I didn't plan this, honest, it just happened this way. In any case, it's really only a partial cliff hanger, so don't stone me.

As far as the dementor not being effected by Harry's curse, I think it's more realistic that way because if regular curses could actually hurt dementors then they wouldn't be feared like they are, and the Patronus Charm wouldn't be as important.

Next chapter Harry finally gets sorted and all that jazz. Once again thanks for reading!

Messenger writing Key:

Harry
Row
Jack

Without further ado.....

Harry awoke slowly to the feeling of something sweet being pressed in between his lips. A warm feeling gradually replaced the cold inside of him, and he opened his eyes to see Remus Lupin and Row standing over him looking concerned.

“Harry?” Asked Row. “Are you ok, Harry? Can you say something?”

Harry sat up groggily and replaced his glasses on his face.

“I’m ok, I think,” his vision sharpened and he took a quick look around the compartment. “Is everybody else ok? Were you hurt?”

Row shook her head. “After you collapsed Professor Lupin cast a spell that chased that thing away.”

“Really?” Harry asked, turning to Lupin. “What spell was it? The one I cast didn’t do a damn thing.”

“I wouldn’t say that, exactly,” said Lupin with a faint smile as he gestured to the ruined compartment. “Unfortunately dementors are immune to nearly all spells except for the charm I cast.” Lupin waved his wand and began to repair the damaged wall.

“Dementor?” Harry asked, racking his brain. He had come across that name before during his studying, but he couldn’t quite remember where.

“The Patronus charm?” He asked suddenly as it hit him.

“How did you know?” Asked a surprised Lupin. “That’s very advanced magic, where did you hear about it Harry?”

“I read a lot,” Harry replied dismissively. Then he shook his head in disgust. “I didn’t know dementors were that powerful. If you hadn’t come, we’d probably all be dead.”

“The dementors weren’t here to attack, Harry,” said Lupin kindly. “They were searching the train for Sirius Black. I don’t know why they seemed to take a particular interest in you, but rest assured you were not their goal.”

Harry shrugged noncommittally, but inside he was seething.

One day in the magical world and I’ve already been beaten, he thought angrily. So much for my so-called powers, I can’t even make it to Hogwarts! And Row! She would have died if Lupin hadn’t come along. I don’t care what he says, that thing wasn’t searching, it was attacking. It was my job to protect her and I failed. I FAILED! ON THE FIRST ATTACK NO LESS!

“Harry, what’s wrong?” Row asked quietly when she saw that his eyes were burning and his hands were clenched in anger.

Seeing the concern on his sister’s face, Harry reigned in his temper and regained his calm demeanor.

“It’s nothing, Row. I’m just thinking about the dementor, that’s all.”

“Oh, ok,” said Row, but she didn’t look convinced.

Harry retook his seat while Lupin walked up the train to talk to the conductor. A short while later, the train began moving again, but Harry continued to stare out the window in thought.

That’s simply not good enough, he thought, his eyes flashing dangerously. If I can’t deal with a simple dementor, how am I going to deal with Sirius Black? I’ll have to work harder this year than I ever have before. I have to be ready.

He looked over at Row, who was laughing at a joke that Sarah had just told.

I have to be strong for all us, especially Row. Dementors, Black, even Voldemort himself, it doesn't matter. I'll stop anything that threatens us. He turned his gaze back to the passing landscape, his jaw clenched in determination.

No matter what.

Harry passed the rest of the trip in silence, mentally cataloguing the things he would begin working on as soon as he could. As the train approached Hogsmade, he went the restroom and changed into his robes as the girls did the same. He arrived back at the compartment just as the train began to slow down.

"Hey Harry?" Padma asked as he sat down. "What was that spell you tried to use? I didn't actually see you cast it, but it destroyed the whole wall."

"Blasting curse," Harry replied curtly.

Hermione's brow furrowed. "Like a reductor curse?"

"Yeah, sort of."

"What'd you mean, sort of?"

Harry sighed. "I mean that a reductor curse is a type of blasting curse, but it isn't the one I used."

"Is it-," Hermione began, but stopped and looked at her hands. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pester you."

"Don't worry about it, he lives with me, remember?" Interjected Row.

Harry just shook his head and Hermione smiled at that as the train finally came to a complete stop. Harry followed Row outside and into

the throng of students making their way toward a group of carriages that were being pulled by very strange looking creatures. To Harry, it almost looked like a cross between a dragon and a horse.

"What is it, Harry?" Asked Row when she noticed that he'd stopped.

"What are those things?" Harry asked, gesturing to the beasts.

"The horseless carriages?" Row asked. "What's pulling them you mean? Nobody really knows, it's probably just a spell."

"What'd you mean, horseless?" Asked Harry, confused. "I'm talking about the winged horses that are pulling them. What are they?"

Now it was Row's turn to look confused. She opened her mouth to answer, but was stopped by a voice from behind her.

"They're thestrals, Harry Potter," said Luna Lovegood in her usual serene tone. "But most people can't see them, so the carriage appears to be horseless." She fixed her large grey eyes on Harry. "You can only see them if you've seen death." She cocked her head to the side. "It appears that they like you, Harry Potter."

Harry looked away from the odd girl and saw that, sure enough, one of the thestrals seemed to be looking directly at him.

"That's odd, they never look at anyone," Luna continued before she shrugged and turned to Row. "Hello Rowena, nice to see you again." With that, she turned away and walked towards the carriages without even waiting for an answer.

"Don't mind her, she's not quite right in the head," said Row after Luna had gone.

"You really can't see them?" Harry asked as he tore his gaze away from the staring thestral.

"Nope," Row shook her head. "Actually, Luna is pretty well-known for believing in things that don't exist. If it wasn't for the fact that you can see them I'd think she was making it up."

"No, they're definitely real," Harry muttered. "And one of them is definitely staring at me."

Harry started to follow Row toward the carriages but was forced to stop when a very large man suddenly stepped in front of him.

"Harry Potter is it?" The man said, extending a large hand. "Dumbledore told me you'd be here, but I just couldn't believe it," he sniffed. "Sorry, didn't mean to be rude. Name's Rubeus Hagrid, I'm the groundskeeper here at Hogwarts."

"Nice to meet you," Harry said, although he was slightly confused at how emotional the man seemed to be.

"Anyway, you're to come with me and the first years across the lake and then wait 'til the sorting is over, then we go in together."

Harry frowned. "I'd like to go with my sister if it's all the same to you."

"Sister?" Hagrid looked confused.

"I'll be ok, Harry," Row said, patting his arm. "You really should go with Hagrid, the castle is a wonderful sight from the lake."

"Row Thomas is your sister?" If possible, Hagrid looked even more confused.

"You're sure?" Harry asked. Row nodded. "Ok then. I guess I'll see you there. Lead the way, Hagrid."

The giant led Harry towards a group of young students as he continued to call out for the rest of the first years. When he was satisfied that he had everyone, he showed them to the boats. Harry waited until all the other students had chosen before stepping into the last boat along with Hagrid.

"Why do the first years go a different way?" He asked Hagrid as the boat began to move.

“Don’t rightly know, actually,” Hagrid responded. “Always been that way, though. Did I hear you right earlier? Row Thomas is your sister?”

Harry nodded. “Not by birth, of course,” he replied. “But I’ve been living with her and her brother Jack for a while now. We’ve all been emancipated in the muggle world, and as far as I’m concerned she’s my family.”

“Good girl, she is. Always got a smile on her face. Oh, here comes your first look at Hogwarts, Harry. Take a gander.”

Harry turned and looked up just as the corner of Hogwarts castle came into view. As the parapets of Hogwarts slowly unfolded into his line of sight, Harry had to admit that the castle cut quite the impressive figure.

“Well, what’d ya think?”

“It’s beautiful,” said Harry earnestly. “I’ve never seen anything quite like it.”

“They all say that,” said Hagrid proudly. “Great place, Hogwarts. No place like it anywhere else in the world, and that’s a fact.”

Harry and the groundskeeper passed the rest of the trip in relative silence, although Harry did answer the rest of Hagrid’s questions about him and Row being siblings. When the boat finally docked, Hagrid moved to the front and led the group of first years into Hogwarts. They walked until they reached the top of a staircase, where a very stern looking woman was waiting for them in front of two very large doors.

“The first years, Professor McGonagall,” said Hagrid proudly. “Me and Harry here will be waiting for the signal.” He gestured for Harry and moved to the side.

“Very well,” replied McGonagall. “Welcome to Hogwarts, Mr. Potter.” She gave him a piercing look before her eyes softened. “We’re very

glad that you're here." She said quietly. She turned away and led the first years through the large doors.

"Now what?" Harry asked when they had gone.

"Now we wait for the signal and then we go in," Hagrid replied.

Since he had no idea how long they would be waiting, Harry decided to question Hagrid about Hogwarts itself. Hagrid was in the process of telling Harry how to get to the owlery when a chime sounded.

"That's the signal," said Hagrid, cutting off his directions. "Follow me."

Hagrid walked up to the big doors and threw them open to reveal a large room that Harry immediately recognized as the Great Hall. He took the time to look at the enchanted ceiling that he had wondered about every since he first read *Hogwarts: A History* before he carefully surveyed the rest of the room. It was set up exactly as Row had described it, with the four house tables laid out parallel to each other and the professors sitting behind the head table at the front. He snapped out of his observation when he heard applause and realized that Hagrid had just been introduced as the new Care of Magical Creatures Professor.

"Professor Hagrid has kindly volunteered to escort a new third year student who will be starting at Hogwarts this year. May I introduce Mr. Harry Potter."

That must be Dumbledore, Harry thought, looking at the elderly wizard who had made the announcement. Of course the hall erupted in frantic whispering as Harry followed Hagrid up to the front table. Hagrid gave him a smile and a pat on the shoulder as he walked up to take his seat, and Harry was confronted with Professor McGonagall, who was holding an old hat that Harry recognized instantly.

"Please take a seat, Mr. Potter."

Harry complied and the hat was placed on his head, the brim just covering his eyes.

"Well, well, we meet again, Mr. Potter", A voice said in his head. Harry frantically tried to strengthen his mental defenses, which caused the hat to chuckle.

"Don't bother, young one. Occlumency is useless against me, but never fear, I will keep your secrets. I am forbidden to speak of what I see, in fact."

Harry relaxed somewhat, but was still very uncomfortable with the hat on his head.

"Are you the same hat that gave me the sword to fight the basilisk?" He asked mentally.

"The very same," the hat replied. "Ah, I see that the sword has chosen you as its new master. Congratulations."

"What do you mean? The sword disappeared when I touched it later."

"It will come when you call it. It was the blade of Godric Gryffindor himself, created to fight against all the vile creations of Salazar Slytherin, like the basilisk. It has chosen you as its new master; you should be honored."

"Gryffindor's sword?" Harry was astounded. "I guess I'll be in Gryffindor after all, then. Although I would prefer to be in Ravenclaw, if that's possible."

"Hmm," the hat pondered. "You are an enigma, Mr. Potter. You have the qualities of every house, and you have them in spades. Fiercely loyal to your family and protective of everyone they care for. Intelligence well beyond your years, and talents that Rowena herself would be in awe of. You are as ruthless as Salazar when you feel it necessary, and you carry his gift of parseltongue and his ambition to be the most powerful wizard alive. And yet, you bear the blade of Godric himself, which means you hold only the noblest of ideals, and crave power only to protect those that are weaker than you."

“Only the strong can hope to protect the weak,” Harry replied. “I already nearly failed on the train, and I won’t let that happen again. I need to be stronger.”

“Yes, I can see the two traits that drive you. The will to be the strongest and the noble desire to use your power to protect those who need it.” The hat chuckled. “Never in my life have I had a harder decision Mr. Potter. You have the ruthless will of Salazar Slytherin with the noble heart of Godric Gryffindor. I would say it is between those two for you.”

“Slytherin?” Thought Harry, surprised. “That’s where all the racists and bigots are. Plus their head of house is the one blackmailing me, you can’t put me there.”

“It’s true, of course, that Slytherin house has become synonymous with dark arts and pure-blood bias,” the hat responded slowly. “On the other hand, Slytherin himself, when he was young, held the same idea you do, that only the strong can protect the weak.”

Harry thought carefully about that for a moment before he asked his next question.

“Which house will make me stronger, Gryffindor or Slytherin?”

The hat seemed to pause before answering.

“If you go to Gryffindor, you will be admired, praised, and well-liked by your housemates. You will learn the value of friendship, and the rest of the world will continue to look up to you as a hero. Most will support you, some may even fight for you, and you will be strong. But you will not be the strongest.

If you go to Slytherin, you will be outcast, ridiculed, and assaulted. You will be grouped with what you call racists, and will be suspected of dark arts by the rest of the school. You will be scorned for no reason, suspected when you are innocent, and considered evil by many students and some professors. However, if you survive your years in Slytherin house, you will be the strongest that you can possibly be when you leave Hogwarts. I leave the choice to you, Mr.

Potter. One way you will have support and friendship, the other you will be completely alone. And yet, I already know which one you will choose.”

Harry paused as he considered the dilemma the hat had just handed him. He thought about all the lessons that he had learned in his short life, and he found one common thread. He remembered being beaten by his uncle, and the hopeless despair that came with being helpless. He remembered when he became strong enough to escape, and later to extract justice. He remembered the look on Jack’s face the first time they went out together in London, and how the hardened, hopeless look in his eyes had been replaced by youthful exuberance. He thought of escaping Arthur Weasley and his accomplice, and escaping again from Snape on the platform. He thought of Ginny Weasley, Tom Riddle and the basilisk. He thought of Voldemort and Dumbledore, and how each undoubtedly had their own plan for Harry’s future. Lastly, he thought of Sirius Black, who was responsible for the death of Harry’s parents and now desired to end Harry’s life as well. He thought of all the good things he had experienced in life, and he realized that he had them all only because he was powerful enough to prevent others from taking them away. The twinkle in Jack’s eye, the smile on Row’s face, and the love of family that he had come to cherish; all had been possible only because Harry had made it possible. He wasn’t given this life, he had taken it by force, and he would allow no one to take it from him. He made his decision.

“Hardship is not important, and friendships are fickle. Without power there can be no freedom, and I will be free. If that means I walk my path alone, so be it. I choose the path of power. I choose Slytherin.”

“Very well. The hero’s path is a lonely one, young Potter, but I wish you the best. Godric forgive me, for putting the truest heart of Gryffindor in SLYTHERIN!”

Harry took the hat off and placed it back on the stool before turning to survey the now silent hall. Immediately his eyes sought Row’s, and he relaxed when he saw her shake her head with an amused smile on her face. She mouthed “only you” to Harry, who shrugged back at her before he turned and made his way swiftly over to the Slytherin

table. Not knowing where he was supposed to sit, he elected to sit at the end of the table with the other newly sorted students, all of whom were looking at him with wide eyes.

"Well, um, welcome Mr. Potter," Dumbledore said to the still silent hall. He remained silent for a moment before he remembered what he was about to say. "Now, I have a very important announcement before we begin the feast. This year, Hogwarts will be guarded by the dementors of Azkaban, who will patrol the castle perimeter until Sirius Black has been found and captured. I do not mean to alarm you, but I strongly advise you all to be cautious, as dementors are not known for their kindness." The headmaster paused for effect before he smiled. "Now, without further ado, let the feast begin!" Dumbledore spread his hands wide and the table was suddenly filled with food. Harry glanced up at the headmaster, who was looking at him with a mix of apprehension and sadness, as if he couldn't decide whether to fear Harry or to pity him. Harry frowned slightly and started to help himself to some food, completely ignoring the murderous glare he could feel coming from Snape's direction.

"What's the matter, Potter?" Came a girl's voice from farther up the table. "Too scared to sit with the rest of us?" A few of the boys farther up the table laughed.

Harry looked up from his food and saw that the owner of the voice was a pug-faced girl sitting next to the Malfoy boy he had "introduced" himself to earlier. Judging from the way she was leaning on the blond boy and sneering at Harry, he thought it safe to assume they wouldn't be friends anytime soon.

"I didn't know where to sit, actually," Harry replied honestly. "If you wanted to sit with me, you should have saved me a spot."

Her face flushed. "I didn't want to sit with you!" She screeched.

"Then I don't see the problem," Harry shrugged and went back to his food, but not before pulling his wand and placing it in his sleeve.

This proved to be a very good idea, as the red faced girl drew her own wand and pointed it at Harry.

“Furnunculus!”

Harry shifted slightly to his left as he drew his wand and gave it a quick upwards flick.

“Protego.” He said firmly.

Having never tested his shield against a curse, Harry was actually rather curious as to what would happen. The shield formed in front of him like he planned, but rather than reflect the curse back at the caster, the curse was deflected straight into the table, causing food to spray the second year students. Harry frowned slightly, and figured that the angle of the shield must be more important than he thought. He was almost hoping that someone would cast another curse when he saw Professor Snape striding angrily towards him.

“POTTER!” He barked. “What do you think you are doing? Five minutes and you’re already causing trouble! Five points from Slytherin and detention with me tomorrow night!”

Harry frowned as Malfoy and his group began to snigger.

“No.”

Snape froze.

“What did you say?”

“I said no,” Harry responded evenly. “I did nothing wrong, and I will not serve a detention.”

“Make it a weeks detention for blatant disrespect!” Snape hissed, glaring murderously at Harry.

Harry just shook his head. “Make it a year, if you like. I’m still not going.” He said calmly.

Snape’s pale face became a blotchy red as he flushed in anger.

“Don’t let him get away with this, professor,” came Malfoy’s voice from up the table. “He attacked Crabbe, Goyle, and I on the train before we got here. I was going to tell you later sir.” Crabbe and Goyle nodded their agreement.

“So, Potter. Attacking students and insulting professors on your first day? I’ll have you expelled for this, you arrogant brat!”

“After all the trouble you went through to get me here?” Harry asked, giving Snape a meaningful look.

Snape’s flush deepened, and his gaze bore into Harry’s. Harry met his gaze calmly, until he felt a foreign presence trying to creep into his mind. Harry’s eyes widened in surprise before they narrowed dangerously and he lashed out viciously with his own legilimency, slamming into Snape’s mind with all the finesse of a sledge hammer.

Snape cried out in pain and fell to his knees grabbing his head. Harry felt the attacking presence disappear and quickly stopped his own attack before reinforcing his defenses in case Snape tried again.

By now the rest of the hall was watching the drama unfolding at the Slytherin table with wide eyes. To everyone else, it appeared that Snape and Harry had simply been glaring at each other when suddenly the professor collapsed holding his head. The only person who knew for certain what had just happened was the headmaster, who made his way swiftly over to his fallen colleague.

“Mr. Potter, I believe it would be best if you accompany me to my office.”

Harry shrugged and got up to follow the headmaster, but stopped when Snape also made to follow.

“Harry? If you would?” Said Dumbledore, gesturing for him to follow.

“I won’t walk with him behind me,” Harry replied, gesturing to Snape.

The headmaster glanced at the potions master, whose glare had reached a new level of intensity.

“Harry, I assure you that Professor Snape will not attack you.”

“He already did,” Harry replied in his usual even tone. “Have him lead the way and I will follow. Otherwise forget it.”

“You miserable, arrogant-” Snape growled, spit flying from his mouth.

“That is enough, Severus. Please, lead the way so that we can resolve this matter.”

Snape scowled fiercely but complied, and Harry followed the two wizards through the castle halls until they reached a large stone gargoyles that he recognized at the entrance to the headmaster’s office.

When they were inside, Harry waited for Snape to take his seat before assuming a standing position on the opposite side of the room.

“Please, take a seat Harry,” said Dumbledore, gesturing to one of the chairs in front of the desk. “Lemon Drop?”

Harry eyed the headmaster quizzically.

“No thanks, I prefer to stand.” He replied slowly.

“As you wish Harry,” said Dumbledore as he leaned back in his chair. “Now, would you care to tell me what happened in the great hall earlier?”

Harry shrugged. “It’s simple enough, really. One of the older students tried to curse me, I used a shield charm and the curse hit the table. Snape came over-”

“Professor Snape, Harry,” Dumbledore interrupted quietly.

Harry regarded the headmaster thoughtfully.

Pick your battles, he thought to himself.

Harry inclined his head. "I apologize. Professor Snape came over and accused me of cursing the table on purpose, and gave me a detention. I told him I refused to attend a detention for something I didn't do, at which point he attacked me using legilimency and I fought him off."

"You filthy brat!" Snape seethed. "He's lying, headmaster!"

"Enough, Severus," Dumbledore held up his hand. "I am curious, Harry, how it is that you know what legilimency is, and even more curious how you managed to fight off Professor Snape's intrusion, if that is in fact what happened."

"I've studied quite a bit of magic," Harry said dismissively. "You already know that, of course. Occlumency and Legilimency are two things that I have read a significant amount on, although I hardly consider myself an expert in either field, I know enough to detect and repel an attack."

"May I test you, Harry?" The headmaster asked. Harry thought for a moment before nodding.

Immediately, Harry could feel a pressure on his mental defenses, but unlike with Snape he couldn't tell exactly where the attack was coming from. Rather than lash out like he had before, Harry carefully extended his own defenses out slowly and evenly, until he had pushed the presence into a single area. He was careful not to move too fast, or push too hard, lest the headmaster discover how proficient he truly was with the mind arts. Once he had located the attacking presence, he slowly and carefully pushed it out of his mind.

"Truly extraordinary Harry," said Dumbledore. "You have the most advanced mental defense of anyone your age that I have ever met. Who taught you?"

"I taught myself, mostly," Harry replied carefully. He could tell that Dumbledore was fishing for information, and he would have to be careful not to give anything away. "Actually, most of it comes from basic meditation that I learned when I was younger."

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "Well, it is a truly remarkable accomplishment for one so young."

"Surely you don't believe the boy, headmaster!" Snape exploded. "He attacked me in the middle of the hall right after he attacked another student! You cannot mean to let him go unpunished. He should expelled!"

The headmaster was about to respond when he was stopped by the sound of Harry's quiet laughter.

"Let me get this straight," Harry began. "You blackmail me into coming here, and now you want me gone?" He snorted. "I mean, really, make up your mind."

"Blackmail?" Dumbledore said sharply. "What blackmail?"

Snape's face had gone from blotchy red to pale white. "I don't know what he's talking about headmaster. He is an attention seeking liar, nothing-"

"You mean you didn't know?" Harry interrupted incredulously. "You didn't know that Professor Snape threatened to stop Row's emancipation if I didn't come to Hogwarts? You didn't know that he actually filed for her guardianship himself, and swore to me that he would hide her away if I didn't agree to come? Surely you didn't think I simply woke up one morning and decided it was a nice day to come out of hiding? Didn't my sudden change of heart make you the least bit curious?"

Dumbledore regarded his potions master with quiet horror.

"Severus, how could you? I told you specifically that Harry needed to come to us in his own time." He turned his gaze back to Harry. "I assure you, Harry, I had no idea that this was happening. It seems that I cannot quite seem to get anything right when it comes to you, and again I must apologize." He threw a stern look at the potions master. "I believe we can forget about this little incident tonight. The feast should be breaking soon, and I would hate to keep you from

your new housemates, Harry. If you will excuse us, I will have a house elf show you to the Slytherin quarters.”

Dumbledore snapped his fingers and a small green elf appeared at the door before gesturing for Harry to follow him. Harry nodded briefly to the headmaster and followed the elf out the door, leaving a very angry Albus Dumbledore and a very nervous Severus Snape behind.

Harry followed the elf through the many twists and turns of Hogwarts until finally they came around a final turn and ran into a large group of Slytherin students being lead down a flight of stairs. Thanking the elf, Harry hurried to catch up and fell in line next to a dark skinned boy about his height. A quick survey of the group showed that Malfoy was walking well ahead of him, surrounded by the same people that were seated next to him at dinner. Harry also noticed that the group seemed to be walking in order by year, with the exception being Malfoy’s group, which was currently walking just behind the sixth years. Harry filed this information away for future use.

“Potter? When did you get here?” The boy next to him asked.

“Just now,” Harry shrugged. “The headmaster suggested I come down and meet my housemates. I don’t suppose you’re a third year as well?”

The boy eyed him critically. “Actually, I am. Blasie Zabini,” he said, extending a hand. Harry shook it. “This is my friend, Tracey Davis,” Zabini said, gesturing to the blonde girl on the other side of him. She had light blue eyes and a thin, alluring figure that moved with almost catlike grace. Harry shook her hand as well.

“So not all Slytherins hate me then?” Harry asked casually. Blaise snorted.

“We may not hate you, but that doesn’t mean we like you,” he replied. “You’ve already made an enemy of Malfoy, and that’s a very bad idea in Slytherin house. The only reason I’m talking to you is because I’m curious and because Malfoy is too far ahead to see.”

“Everyone is afraid of him, then? Why?”

“His family is very powerful,” Tracey said, joining the conversation. “His father is on the board of governors for the school and Professor Snape is pretty much on his payroll. Even the older students give him a wide berth.”

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment before he asked his next question.

“The only thing I know about Malfoy is that he thinks that pure-blooded wizards are superior to everyone else. Do you guys agree with that?”

Tracey looked uncomfortable and Blaise frowned.

“Look,” he said quietly. “That’s exactly the type of question you don’t ask around here. Whether or not we agree with him is irrelevant. Even if we didn’t, we’d still pretend like we did. Anything else is practically suicide. You understand what I’m saying here?”

“So you don’t agree with him, but you’ll never say it out loud,” Harry said slowly. “I can understand that you don’t want him as an enemy, I guess. I will tell you this, though,” he looked Blaise in the eye. “you don’t want me as an enemy either.”

Tracey heard this statement and shivered involuntarily, but Blaise only smiled.

“You know, Potter, you just might be a Slytherin after all.” He said with a smirk.

Blaise turned back to talk to Tracey and Harry looked ahead to where the group was slowly coming to a stop in front a rather nondescript section of the castle wall.

“The password is ‘will to power.’” Said the prefect up front. As he said it, the wall opened slowly to reveal a long, narrow room lit by green lanterns hanging from the ceiling. Lining the room on either side was

a series of couches, chairs, and bookcases, as well as a small fireplace in the corner with a large table in front of it. Finished with his quick survey, Harry followed the rest of the group inside and then followed Blaise to the third year dorms, choosing to skip the first year introduction speech.

He arrived in a room with six four poster beds lining the walls, each with elegant silver and green curtains embroidered with the snake of Slytherin house. Harry noticed that his own trunk was at the foot of one of the beds in the far corner of the room next to where Blaise was standing, and he made his way over there only to be blocked once again by Draco Malfoy.

"Well, if it isn't little Potty," he spat. "You don't fool me for a second. You're no Slytherin, and there's nobody to protect you in here." He smirked maliciously.

Harry's eyes grew cold as he regarded the pompous boy in front of him.

"If you think I need protection from, you are sorely mistaken," he said coldly. "Or have you forgotten your experience on the train? Should I refresh your memory?"

Malfoy's smirk faltered a bit but his eyes burned. "You don't scare me, Potter. I don't know how you got out of detention, but you'll learn who runs Slytherin house soon enough," he spat before turning to Crabbe and Goyle. "Let's go."

Harry remained in his alert stance until all three had left the room, leaving Harry alone with Blaise and another, shorter boy with short brown hair who was going through his trunk at the front of the room.

When he was sure they had left, Harry made his way over to his bed and cast a few detection charms. Finding nothing out of the ordinary, he moved his trunk so that it was touching the bed frame and attached it using a sticking charm. He didn't think Malfoy would be able to get into his trunk, but there was always the possibility that he could simply hide it out of spite, and Harry was not about to let that happen.

His task done, he turned to find that the other boy had left and Blaise was about to head back to the common room.

“What time is curfew here?” He asked.

“Nine,” Blaise responded, pausing at the door. He smirked. “I wouldn’t miss it if I were you. It seems like Professor Snape hates you enough already.”

Harry nodded his thanks as Blaise walked out of the room. When he was gone Harry ducked into his bed and pulled the curtains shut before taking out his messenger.

R-

Write back when you’re alone.

-H

He started to put the messenger back in his pocket when a reply appeared.

I’m alone now. I figured you’d want to talk

Harry had to smile at that.

Yeah. I know it’s a shocker, but the hat gave me a choice between Gryffindor and Slytherin, and when I asked which house would make me stronger, it said Slytherin, so that’s what I picked.

You actually PICKED Slytherin? Did you hit your head or something?

Ha ha.

Ok, sorry. It’s just weird, you know? Everybody in Slytherin looks down on the rest of the school, and they always lie, cheat, and steal to get their way. That’s not you at all.

I don't think they're all like that. I just think that they have to act that way or else they'll be outcast by the people that run the show, like Malfoy. Supposedly his family is really powerful, and that's why he gets away with everything.

So all they respect is power?

I don't know if that's all that matters, but I know that the only reason some people follow Malfoy is that they're afraid of what will happen if they don't. I'm sure I'll find out more after I meet more of them. How are your friends taking my being in Slytherin?

They're nervous, but I told them not to worry. I think you should talk to Hermione though. You were the first person to really stand up for her, and now she's probably worried that it was all some big joke.

She saw me on the train too. Have you talked to her about that?

I didn't get a chance, we came straight back to our common room after the feast.

I know she's your friend, but I'm seriously thinking about obliviating her.

I figured you would be. I really think you can trust her Harry.

It's just too big a risk.

If you do, be careful, Harry. Memory charms are dangerous.

I know, but you've seen me practicing. I'm not going to do anything serious, just slightly change what she thinks she saw.

I still don't like it, but I trust you, and I can see why you think it's necessary. She usually goes to breakfast early, so maybe you can catch her then. In any case, tomorrow morning we'll compare schedules and set up study times in the library. You should come with us.

That sounds good. We get our schedules tomorrow then?

Yeah, tomorrow at breakfast.

What's the rest of your house saying?

Well, you're not going to like it. The most popular rumor right now is that you've been practicing Dark Arts since you were little, and they didn't want you at Hogwarts before now because you're too dangerous. Sarah and Padma stood up for you though, and pointed out that you actually blasted Malfoy around. Of course, a couple of the older girls said that just proved that you were practicing dark magic.

The hat said something like this would happen, and I guess it really doesn't matter anyway. Maybe if everybody's afraid of me they'll leave me alone.

Don't count on it.

Yeah, probably wishful thinking.

Don't worry, I'm sure not everybody is going to think you're evil just because you're in Slytherin. Maybe you should beat up Snape again, except do it in the great hall!

I almost did that today. Did you see him attack me with legilimency?

He didn't! It looked like he just collapsed, and nobody saw you do anything. So you were really fighting him and he really did attack you?

Yeah, he did. I hit him back with legilimency and that's what made him fall to the ground. You need to be extra careful around him, especially now. Never look him in the eye and remember what I taught you about occlumency.

I remember. Wow Harry, you've only been here a day and you've already been in two different fights?

It would have been 3, but the headmaster apparently didn't know that Snape blackmailed me into coming here, so he let me off.

You told him? Oh boy, I wouldn't want to be Snape right now.

Hey is this a private party or can anybody join?

Jack! You're actually using the messenger!

What can I say, I miss you guys. So Harry got sorted into the evil house?

Pretty much. I got into a fight with three guys on the train for insulting Row, and then I get here and I'm in the same house as them.

Are there any cute girls in your year?

Actually, there's a girl I met today who was pretty cute. You'd like her, anyway – she had a nice figure.

I am SO not trying to hear this.

You were the one that said he needed a girlfriend.

I didn't mean right away!

Why would you say I need a girlfriend?

I'll tell you some other time. Weren't we talking about why you picked Slytherin?

Yeah, I read the part about you talking to a hat. What's that about?

A magic hat is what decides which house you will be in. It looks through your mind to find out where you fit best.

A magic hat? Well that's just stupid, isn't it?

You know, I assumed that since you'd actually taken the time to use the messenger that you wanted to have an intelligent conversation. I apologize for overestimating you.

Serves you right.

Ok children, as much as I'm enjoying this, I'm going to have to put a bunch of charms on my bed before I go to sleep to make sure I don't get attacked by my new housemates, so I'm gong to sign off.

Don't let the evil guys get you down. And say hi to that girl for me.

I won't do either of those. I'll see you tomorrow at breakfast, ok Row?

Ok, I'll see you then. I love you guys.

We love you too.

Oh, isn't that sweet.

I take it back, I only love Harry.

Oh! You wound me!

This is amazing. We're not even in the same room and you two are giving me a headache.

I'm talented.

GOOD BYE, JACK

Ok, Ok. I'll annoy you tomorrow. Until then.

These are not toys, Jack. Remember, we're not even supposed to have them here.

I know, I was kidding. Go cast your spells.

Alright, good night

Night.

Night.

With a smile Harry closed the messenger and started casting proximity charms around his bed. It would be much more effective if he could actually cast wards, but he hadn't yet been able to find any useful texts on the subject. When he was satisfied that nothing could approach him during the night without waking him, he removed his Arithmancy book from his trunk and changed into sleeping clothes, slipping quietly into bed to wait for his housemates to return from the common room.

A little while later he heard the door open and his roommates enter. He heard Malfoy make a few remarks in his direction, but none of his proximity charms were tripped and eventually the rest of the lights in the room were extinguished and silence fell. When he was satisfied that the other boys were asleep, Harry put his book away and strapped his wand to his wrist before he too, closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

He awoke early the next morning, as was his custom, and carefully removed his proximity charms before heading to the bathroom for a morning shower. When he re-entered the dorm, the rest of his roommates were just beginning to stir. Harry went to his trunk and grabbed his book on ancient runes before leaving the dorm to make his way down to breakfast.

When he arrived at the Great Hall, he was surprised to see that there were only a handful of students already there. He searched the Ravenclaw table for Row, but couldn't find her or her friends. As he scanned the rest of the room, he saw that Hermione was sitting by herself at the end of the Gryffindor table, and made his way over to her.

"Hello Hermione," Harry said as he approached. "Mind if I join you?"

Hermione looked shocked for moment and could only nod dumbly. Harry took a seat and began to help himself to some eggs.

“Hermione, I know that you’ve taken a lot of abuse from Slytherins in your time at Hogwarts,” he said carefully. “But I want you to know that you don’t have to be afraid of me. I’m not in Slytherin because I’m a racist or a bully. The hat said I could have been in Gryffindor too, actually. It just wasn’t the best place for me right now.”

“I’m not afraid of you, Harry,” Hermione said quietly. “But I am afraid of what they’ll do to you if you try to fight them. The way you stood up for us on the train...well, I never really thanked you for it. So, thank you, but you should never do it again. It’s not worth it.”

Harry regarded the girl in front of him carefully. He knew from what Row had told him that Hermione was often rather subdued, and Row wondered if it was because she started to believe all the ‘worthless mudblood’ insults that were thrown her way. From what he’d just heard, it appeared that maybe she was right.

“Hermione, I want you to promise me something,” Harry said seriously. “I want you to tell me every time somebody from Slytherin threatens you, or calls you ‘mudblood,’ or does anything else that makes you feel unsafe. Can you do that?”

“What are you going to do?” Hermione asked fearfully.

“I’m going to make sure they get punished for it.”

“You can’t do that,” Hermione said frantically. “It will only get worse! The one time I tried to tell a teacher, Professor Snape came in and said I made the whole thing up, and for the next week they were even nastier than usual. Please, Harry, just leave it alone!”

“I can’t do that,” Harry shook his head. “You’re Row’s friend, and that means that if there’s anything I can do to help you, I will.”

“It won’t help!” Hermione practically screeched before calming herself. “It doesn’t matter what house you’re in, you won’t be able to get them in trouble!”

"I'm not talking about telling a professor," Harry said carefully. He sighed. "Actually, this brings up something I really need to talk to you about. It's about what you saw on the train."

Hermione's ears perked up and she leaned close to Harry. "The wandless magic?" She whispered.

"I need to tell you something very important, ok Hermione?" Harry moved his arm around her so that his hand was resting on the shoulder opposite him with his palm extended towards the side of her head. "I need you to look at me. You remember what you saw on the train?" As Hermione nodded, Harry carefully entered her mind and centered it on the incident with Draco Malfoy. When that experience was completely in focus, Harry touched his hand to the side of her head and performed a memory charm, using legilimency to target the precise moment she had seen him do his wandless magic.

"You didn't really see me doing wandless magic, you just thought you did. Looking back on it, you saw that I actually had my wand the whole time, but it was hidden from your view and that was what confused you." As he spoke, he subtly checked to ensure that her memory was forming correctly and when he was satisfied he cancelled the spell.

"So, you can see that I actually did have my wand the whole time," Harry said like they were in the middle of a conversation. "Although I don't use it quite the same way you're taught here at Hogwarts." He smiled.

"Of course you did," Hermione replied. "Honestly, I don't know what I was thinking. I just couldn't see your wand from the angle I was watching from. It's actually pretty embarrassing."

"Don't worry about it," Harry reassured her. "And I mean it about Malfoy and his gang. I want to know everything they do. I won't tell them you told me, but I want to know. Ok?"

Hermione still looked skeptical, but gave him a hesitant nod. Satisfied, Harry was about to turn back to his breakfast when a voice interrupted him.

“What’d you think you’re doing here, Potter?”

Harry looked up and found that the voice belonged to a rather tall, gangly red head that he immediately recognized as one of the Weasley kids from Diagon Alley. Next to him was a slightly shorter, sandy-haired boy who was looking at Harry like he couldn’t decide whether to hit him or ask for an autograph.

“I was just talking to Hermione here, actually,” Harry replied evenly as he looked the boy in the eye. “I don’t believe we’ve been introduced, I know you’re one of Ginny’s brothers, but I’m not sure which.”

“I’m Ron Weasley, this is Seamus Finnegan, and Slytherins aren’t allowed at the Gryffindor table.” Ron said curtly.

Harry frowned and looked at Hermione. “Is that a rule?”

“It most certainly is not,” Hermione said, glaring daggers at Ron, who bristled.

“It might not be in the rulebook, but it’s still a rule.”

“His sister saved Ginny’s life, you know,” Hermione pointed out sharply. “Maybe you could give him a break?”

“Well, she’s not his real sister,” Ron said dumbly, but the fight had gone out of his argument. “Look, it’s nothing personal, and I know Row says you’re ok, but Slytherins and Gryffindors don’t mix, and the sooner you learn that, the better off we’ll all be. Now, I believe your table is over there.” Ron and the boy next to him pointed across the hall to the Slytherin table.

“If you insist,” Harry said casually, picking up his book. “It was nice talking to you, Hermione. Row said something about comparing schedules?”

“Yes, we always do it after breakfast when the timetables are handed out.”

Harry nodded. "I'll see you then." He turned and walked past the two Gryffindor boys without so much as a glance and made his way across the hall. As he sat at the end of the Slytherin table, he cast a look back at Hermione and let out a large sigh.

It wasn't like he enjoyed messing with people's minds, he actually felt horrid about what he'd just done, but that didn't change the fact that he had to do it. He'd been over it in his head a thousand times: the only thing he couldn't afford to have discovered was the fact that he could do all his magic wandless. There was little doubt in his mind that if that got out, he'd be hounded for the rest of his life, maybe even thrown into a room somewhere to be studied. He shivered at the thought of the entire wizarding world looking at him like some sort of mutant, and turned his attention to Professor Snape, who was walking in his direction.

"Potter," he spat venomously. "The headmaster wishes to talk to you in his office about your schedule."

Harry regarding the potions master coolly before picking up his book and walking carefully out of the hall. His memory was good enough that he made it to the headmaster's office relatively quickly and gave the password to the gargoyles. When he reached the top of the stairs, he knocked twice and waited patiently to be acknowledged.

"Come in, Harry," came Dumbledore's voice.

Harry opened the door and walked in to find Dumbledore seated behind his desk bent over some paperwork.

"Ah, how are you this morning, my boy?" Dumbledore asked. "Slept well, I hope?" Harry nodded. "Very well, would you care to sit?"

Harry shook his head and the headmaster sighed.

"Now then, I have your schedule here, and I see that you have elected to take Arithmancy and Ancient Runes as your elective courses, is that correct?"

"It is."

“Both worthy choices, to be sure, however I was wondering if you’d given any thought to the subject of Divination? I believe you would find it most enlightening.”

Harry’s brow furrowed. “If I may be honest, sir?” Dumbledore nodded. “I don’t believe in divination. Everything I’ve read on the subject stresses the fact that anything you learn is basically worthless until it’s already happened because the predictions can be interpreted in so many different ways.” He shook his head. “I’m afraid I am not at all interested in a subject like that.”

“You seem to have given this a lot of thought, Harry,” Dumbledore said, eyeing him thoughtfully. “You understand that true prophecies do exist?”

Harry frowned. “I don’t know if they do or not, I suppose they could, but to be honest, I really don’t care. Anybody can throw around vague statements that appear true after the fact, and I have no interest in thinking about what could happen; I prefer to focus on making things happen.”

The headmaster seemed to be weighing options in his head before reaching a decision of some kind and handing Harry a piece of parchment.

“Very well, Harry. Here is your schedule, I hope it meets with your approval. Now, is there anything I can help you with before you go?”

“Actually, there is,” Harry said with a scowl. “Why did Row and I get attacked by one of the dementors on the train yesterday?”

“I assure you, Harry, the dementors were not there to attack you,” Dumbledore said kindly. “I already spoke to professor Lupin, who agreed that while the dementor seemed to be taking an unusual interest in you, that could have been because you had recently cast it out a window.” The headmaster finished in an amused voice.

"That's not true," Harry said, shaking his head. "The dementor opened the door to our compartment and came in before I did anything. It was trying to grab me when I threw it back."

"I'm sure it may have seemed that way, Harry," Dumbledore replied. "But I have the strictest assurances from the minister himself that the dementors are not to interfere with the students. You have nothing to worry about."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "I guess you don't believe me, but I was attacked on the train. Then I was attacked again by a professor." He said coldly as he stood up. "Rather ironic I'd say, considering how you claim that Hogwarts is the safest place for me. I guess we'll find out." When he was finished, Harry turned and walked briskly back to the Slytherin dorms, leaving Albus Dumbledore shaking his head in frustration.

A/N So there it is. Slytherin. Basically the question that it really comes down to is "What drives Harry Potter?" True he craves knowledge, but only because knowledge is power. He's extremely loyal, but only to his family, and he doesn't trust anyone else. He's heroic and brave, but he's also cunning and ruthless. What it all boils down to is that Harry had to be either Gryffindor or Slytherin, since I think it's very true that he has a Slytherin mind and a Gryffindor heart. If given a choice, I believe that this Harry would choose whatever house would make him strong enough to protect the people he cares about. There are two quotes in that section that I think really embody Harry's thought process:

- 1.) Only the strong can hope to protect the weak
- 2.) There can be no freedom without power.

Hence, Slytherin.

As for him obliterating Hermione, I really didn't like it either but nothing else was realistic. If he lets her keep her knowledge there's too many ways people can find out (like Snape using legilimency), and it's too big a risk. Harry doesn't like risks.

I tried to be fair to Ron as well. I'm not trying to make him some mega-git and the new leader of Gryffindor who leads a crusade against Harry Potter, but at the same time he is biased against all Slytherins, and he tends to be extremeley narrow-minded.

Ok, that's it for the notes. Next chapter Harry tries to get into the Hogwarts groove, and Malfoy makes a mistake that comes back to bite him.

Since September first fell on a Wednesday, Harry had only three classes his first day at Hogwarts: Herbology, Runes, and Arithmancy. Herbology was with the Hufflepuffs and his electives were a mix of all four houses, and all three classes were, in Harry's opinion, spectacularly boring.

Because no one in Slytherin house wanted to work with him in Herbology, he had been paired with a Hufflepuff girl named Susan Bones, who had been so nervous that Harry actually had to maintain a full five foot separation between them two of them to keep her from constantly flinching. As a result, he spent the majority of the lesson craning his neck to see what was going on. When he asked why she was so nervous, she looked at him fearfully and tried to respond, but was only able to manage a small squeak. Sighing, he made a mental note to ask Row if the rumors about him had gotten worse.

Arithmancy and Runes, while devoid of any of the drama he'd faced in Herbology, were equally worthless, since the teachers had simply recited what he'd already read, and then assigned reading homework that he'd already covered. The only bright spot was that he was able to compare schedules with Hermione and find out when he could meet Row and her friends in the library for their study sessions.

His first day of class complete, Harry decided to head to the library to see if he could find any decent books on wards that he could use to defend his bed and belongings. Unfortunately, the only book that appeared like it would be useful was in the restricted section, and somehow he doubted he would be able to convince a teacher to give him a pass. Deciding he would do something about that later, he went in search of an empty classroom to practice in.

Taking out his wand, he sealed the door before going through a number of spells that he could already do wandless to see if he could tell the difference. What he found was that he could do all the spells just as easily, but the wand added an extra dimension of power that made them harder to control. He did note that transfiguration seemed to be easier with the added power, and resolved to test his limits later. His first task done, he moved on to something that had been bothering him since his sorting.

“Ok sword,” he muttered. “COME!” He whipped his hand forward like he was expecting something to be thrown to him, but nothing came.

Harry frowned.

“I guess it would be kinda stupid if it were that easy,” he muttered. Closing his eyes, he pictured what it felt like to feel the sword in his hand. He remembered the last time, he had been desperate for anything that would help him against the basilisk, and the sword had answered his call.

Need. He thought to himself. I need the sword. Come, I need you.

Harry’s eyes snapped open when he felt cool steel pressing against his palm, and sure enough the sword of Gryffindor lay before him, exactly how he remembered it. He took the sword through a few forms before concentrating on banishing it and calling it back. After another thirty minutes of practice, Harry was confident that he could call and banish the sword at a moments notice, and left the classroom feeling quite pleased with himself. Having no wish to return to the Slytherin common room, he went back to the library to see what he could find out about the weapon he had somehow inherited.

When Row found him later that evening, he was surrounded by open textbooks and had his nose buried in one titled The Legend of Godric Gryffindor.

“Ok Harry, what gives?” She asked as she took a seat across from him. “You missed dinner and now I find you surrounded by books on the founders. Something’s going on.”

Harry threw up a silencing charm around them before he answered.

“You remember how Dumbledore’s phoenix brought me a sword to fight the basilisk?” He asked, Row nodded. “Well, the sorting hat told me that it’s actually Godric Gryffindor’s sword, and that it chose me as its new master. Basically, it means that I can call the sword to appear in my hand whenever I want, so I figured I might as well find out everything I can about it.”

“The sword of Gryffindor? You can just conjure it?”

Harry shook his head. “It’s more like a summoning. Now that I know about it, I can almost feel it, like it’s attached to me somehow.”

“Have you found out anything else about it?”

“Nothing concrete,” Harry said, frowning. “There are a lot of legends about the sword, but Gryffindor apparently died before he could actually pass it on to anyone, so nobody knows for sure what it can do. I did find one thing that was interesting though,” he said, turning one of the open books to face Row. “Three different books mention the fact that he was able to channel magic through the sword, making the blade glow certain colors. For all we know, it might actually work like a wand.”

Row started to say something but stopped when she saw Hermione and Padma enter the library and wave.

“Oh, you should know that I did modify Hermione’s memory. She thinks she was confused and I had my wand the whole time.”

Row’s brow furrowed but she nodded and Harry took down the silencing charm.

“What are you guys working on?” Padma asked as she took a seat.

“Not much, really. My first day was pretty boring,” Harry replied. “Actually, I was hoping I could get Row to help me with some practical stuff.”

“Sure,” said Row, shrugging. “You want to find an empty classroom?” Harry nodded and started to get up from the table.

“What are you guys gonna work on?” Padma asked.

“I think mostly transfiguration, maybe a little defense,” Harry replied carefully. “I want to make sure I’m ready for the rest of my lessons.”

Padma just shrugged her acceptance and Row followed Harry out of the library and back to the empty classroom that he had used earlier. Once Harry had sealed the room, he turned back to his sister.

“Ok, first things first,” he said, and summoned Gryffindor’s sword.

“Wicked,” Row breathed. Harry gave her a small grin.

“Yeah, I have to admit I wasn’t expecting this.” He banished the sword and took out his wand.

“Ok, what did you really want to work on?” Row asked, taking out her wand as well.

“I want to work on my shield charms,” Harry replied. “Protego first, then once I have that down I want to try the more advanced magical shields, like contego and cunctus contego. Also, I want to try to get into the habit of drawing my wand, so I want you to curse me randomly.”

Row was frowning. “Why?”

“I can’t afford another slip like the one on the train,” Harry replied. “I keep my wand strapped to my wrist, like this,” he held out his arm and Row could see that his wand was attached to his forearm by a thin strap of leather. “But I need to make sure that my instinct is to draw it and cast normally, using incantations too. Otherwise people will wonder why I do everything differently.”

“Ok, I guess,” Row said skeptically.

“You’ll see what I’m talking about as we go. Just try to disarm me.”

The two practiced their spell work for the next hour, with Row practicing various curses and jinxes while Harry concentrated on blocking and deflecting them. By the end of the hour, Harry could successfully reflect the curses back at the caster using protego, and had managed to protect himself and the area about a meter to either side of him using cunctus contego. More importantly, he had managed

the spells both with and without his wand. Overall, he was rather pleased.

“Can you teach me those shields, Harry?” Row asked when they were done.

“Sure,” Harry replied, nodding. “Actually, it would probably be a good idea for you to learn everything you can. We’ll work on it more next time.”

“Sounds good,” Row smiled. “How are things in Slytherin?”

“So far so good,” Harry grimaced. “But Malfoy is going to try something, I’m almost sure. Actually, I’m planning on sneaking into the restricted section tonight to look at a book on wards. If I can find what I’m looking for, I shouldn’t have to worry about him, at least not when I’m in my room.”

Row paused for a moment before taking a deep breath.

“Ok, Harry,” she began, “you’re not going to like this suggestion, but I really think you should tell Dumbledore. I know you don’t trust him,” she said quickly. “And I don’t either, but if you’re going to be a student here, you should at least give him a chance to do something before you blast Malfoy into oblivion.” She grinned.

Harry frowned. “If he tells Snape, then Snape will tell Malfoy, and that could end up hurting me. You really think he’s going to do something about it?” Harry asked skeptically.

Row shrugged. “I don’t know whether he’ll be able to help or not, but I do know that if you really want to try and fit in here, you should tell him.”

“I really don’t care about fitting in,” Harry pointed out.

“I know,” Row replied. “But you can’t do everything alone, Harry. It’s the headmaster’s responsibility to make sure the school is safe, so all I’m suggesting is that you give him a chance to do his job. Think of it like this,” she said, eyeing him carefully. “If you don’t give him a

chance, you'll always wonder if things could have been better." At Harry's skeptical look, she sighed. "Ok, I'll always wonder if things between you could have been better. Do it for me? Please?"

Harry sighed and relented. "Ok, if it'll make you feel better, I'll warn him." Row smiled and nodded. "I think you're going to be disappointed though." Row thought for a moment before shrugging.

"Well, at least you gave him a chance then." She paused. "You know it's just now starting to get around school that you're my brother," she said, smirking. "Pretty soon I'm going to be almost as popular as you."

"Be careful," Harry said, frowning. "Most of the attention I get isn't very good. If you think anybody is threatening you—"

"I'll let you know immediately," Row finished for him. "Don't worry, I got it. Shall we head back?"

Harry nodded and the two made their way out of the classroom where they parted, Row heading back to the library and Harry up towards the headmasters office. Harry gave the password to the gargoyle when he reached it and made his way to knock on the headmaster's door.

"Come in, Harry," Dumbledore said from inside. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" He asked once Harry had entered.

Harry eyed the headmaster carefully. "I believe I may have a problem," he said slowly. "And against my better judgment I'm going to give you a chance to help me with it."

"I am very glad to hear that, Harry," Dumbledore replied with a small smile.

"You know that I had a run-in with Draco Malfoy on the train," Harry began. The headmaster nodded sagely. "I believe he'll attempt some sort of revenge against me, probably soon. Normally, I'd deal with him myself, but since I am a student now, I'm giving you a chance to deal with it before I take matters into my own hands."

“That is a very mature decision, Harry,” Dumbledore said kindly. “And I appreciate the gesture. However, as your head of house, it is up to Professor Snape to decide the correct course of action. Although the two of you have gotten off to a rather, shall we say rocky, start, he should be informed as well.”

Harry shook his head. “I knew you would say that. Believe me when I tell you that Professor Snape is more likely to help Malfoy than to stop him, and if you leave the matter to him, I guarantee that you will not like the results.”

“That is a rather large assumption, Harry. Are you so sure?”

“He hates me,” Harry said bluntly. “I don’t know why, but I know hatred when I see it. I don’t know if it has something to do with Jack and Row, although it’s certainly possible, since he completely ignored them until it suited his purpose not to.” Harry studied the headmaster carefully. “You know why he hates me, don’t you.” It was not a question.

“Professor Snape is a very private person, Harry,” Dumbledore replied carefully. “He does not share his reasons with me or anyone else. I’m afraid he is the only one that can answer your questions.”

“He’d kill me soon as look at me, and you know it.”

“If you’ll forgive me for saying so, you seem remarkably sure of that fact considering how little you know of him,” Dumbledore chastised gently.

“He threatened to take my sister away,” Harry replied immediately. “That’s all I need to know.”

“Things are not always as they appear, Harry,” Dumbledore said cryptically. “Often times you will see someone do the wrong thing for the right reasons. Have you yourself never been forced to make a decision you would rather avoid?”

Harry frowned. "I do what I must," he said simply. He turned to leave before stopping. "But know this: if Malfoy attacks me, I will hurt him. And I will not regret it."

"Then I very much hope that you are wrong, Harry," Dumbledore replied. "I will see to the matter. However, it is rarely possible to change the way someone thinks overnight, especially someone as opinionated as young Mr. Malfoy. In any case, simply because you are stronger than him does not give you the right to make him act as you wish he would."

Harry turned back to Dumbledore with an unreadable expression.

"Precisely."

With that, he turned and made his way out of the office.

After leaving the headmaster's office, Harry made his way down towards the Slytherin dorms. As he was descending toward the dungeons, he noticed that another group of Slytherin students was only slightly ahead of him. On a whim, he made himself invisible before following the other students through the entrance to the common room. As he entered, he noticed Malfoy, Crabbe, Parkinson, and another girl he recognized as Daphne Greengrass talking quietly in the corner while Goyle stood a few paces away from the entrance holding a large bag. Deciding to investigate, Harry made his way quietly over towards the group, but even from ten paces he still couldn't hear anything.

Silencing charm, he thought. Now even more suspicious, he edged his way closer until he was inside the charm.

"..all wrong," Daphne was saying. "You wait until next week, that way he relaxes, thinking that you're not going to do anything, and you catch him by surprise. He'll be expecting an attack immediately, and he'll be ready for it."

"You know, I think you're right," Malfoy replied slowly. He snapped his fingers. "I've got it! We have Defense on Monday, and afterwards we have a free period, and so do the seventh years. I can get Flint as

insurance, and Potter won't suspect a thing. Plus almost the entire house will be here to see it!"

"Ooh," purred Pansy. "That's perfect, Draco! Can I help?"

"You're all going to help," Malfoy said, grinning. "He'll find out what it means to mess with a Malfoy. I bet you he's crying to be sorted out of Slytherin by Tuesday morning."

"Count me out," Daphne said. "I'm happy to help you plan, but that's as far as I go. I'm rubbish with curses anyway, you know that."

Malfoy eyed her sharply, but nodded grudgingly. "Ok, you help with the planning. Here's what I'm thinking..."

Harry listened carefully as Malfoy diagrammed the plan to embarrass and humiliate him in front of the entire school, mentally cataloguing where each player would be and what they were supposed to do. When Malfoy was done, Harry quietly slipped away and snuck back outside the common area, where he made himself visible again before walking through. As soon as he entered the room, Goyle dropped the very large bag he was holding and it hit the floor with a loud CRASH. Immediately the corner group leaned away from each other and started chatting casually. Grinning inwardly, Harry made his way up to the dorm and got ready for bed.

Replacing his proximity charms, Harry started in on his Defense Against the Dark Arts book while he waited for the other boys to go to bed. When they were all accounted for and he was sure they were asleep, he removed the charms around his bed and made himself invisible as he snuck carefully down the stairs and back out into the hallway. Careful to walk quietly, he made his way to the library and stole quickly back into the restricted section.

Although he was tempted to simply browse for a while, Harry knew he didn't have much time, and therefore set straight to finding the book on wards. When he found it, he cast a detection charm that showed an alarm on the book in question, which he deactivated before removing it. That done, he replaced the book he'd taken with an old book from his collection and used a glamour to make it appear the

same. His task finished, he exited the library and walked unnoticed back to his dorm.

Harry awoke early the next morning and again managed to make it out of the room before his housemates began their day. Today he would have his first lessons in Charms and Transfiguration, and he was anxious to see how his skills would compare to the rest of the class. Since it was Friday, that left him the rest of the day to study his book on wards and plan his counter to Malfoy's coming attack.

Transfiguration book in hand, he took his usual seat at the end of the Slytherin table and helped himself to a modest breakfast. As the tables started to fill, he began to mentally catalog the spells he would need to master if he wanted to end Malfoy's reign of terror once and for all. You're no Slytherin, Malfoy had told him. Ironical how that statement would come back to bite him.

After a time, the bell rang signaling the end of breakfast and Harry followed the rest of the 3rd year Slytherins to the Transfiguration classroom, half of which was already occupied by the Gryffindors. Hermione gave him a small wave, which he returned before taking a seat by himself at the front of the room.

"Now," began Professor McGonagall when everyone was seated. "Last year we worked on changing animals into inanimate objects. This year, we will do the opposite, like so." She flicked her wand at the tea cup on her desk and it morphed into a small, white mouse that started to scurry away until she changed it back.

"The relevant section in your book is chapters 3 through 6. You may begin. Potter," she said, turning to Harry. "If I could see you in my office for a moment."

Bewildered, Harry nodded and followed the professor through the door at the back of the classroom.

"Now, Mr. Potter, I know that the headmaster believes you to be capable of third year work, but I would like to verify that for myself, if you don't mind." She flicked her wand and teapot on her desk became

a raven. "If you could, I would like you to transfigure this into a water goblet."

Harry drew his wand and concentrated, before slashing his wand at the raven. There was a flash, and where the Raven had once been there now stood an elegant goblet.

When Harry turned back to the professor, he expected to see her looking at him approvingly, but instead he saw her frowning at him.

"Again, if you could, Mr. Potter," she said in an unreadable tone as she changed the goblet back into a raven. Harry shrugged and focused his magic once more. Again there was a bright flash and the raven instantly became the goblet. He looked at McGonagall expectantly.

"Mr. Potter, I would like you to tell me the process that you use for transfiguration, if you don't mind," she said, still frowning.

"Well, I basically concentrate on what I want," Harry said, shrugging. "Then I compare what I want to what I have, and focus on what aspects I need to change. Once I have the mental picture, I concentrate my magic to change it."

"Do you mean to tell me that you make all the changes simultaneously?" Asked a stunned McGonagall. "You force the change to be instantaneous?"

Bewildered, Harry nodded.

"Mr. Potter, I want you to watch me," McGonagall said. She flicked her wand at the goblet, and Harry watched as it slowly morphed back into a Raven.

"Did you notice how the change was gradual?" She asked, Harry nodded. "That is because I am concentrating on changing one aspect at a time, and I continue my focus until all the changes have been made. Trying to force all the changes at once takes an immense amount of visualization and power, Mr. Potter. I am amazed that you can manage it, even with something this small."

Harry's eyes widened and he felt like slapping himself.

"Transfiguration is not merely a spell, Mr. Potter," McGonagall lectured. "It is an entire process, an art, if you will. The most advanced transfigurations can take even adult wizards some time to perform correctly, and only a wizard who has performed a given transfiguration countless times should even attempt to speed up the process."

"Tell me, Professor," Harry began, inwardly kicking himself. "Would the same be true of conjuring? That is, you cannot simply conjure the final product, it must be done in steps?"

"Heavens yes!" McGonagall gasped. "Instantaneous conjuration is a feat I have only seen the headmaster perform, and even then only with certain objects that he has conjured numerous times before."

Harry groaned. "I should have known I was doing it wrong; transfiguration has always been the hardest subject for me."

McGonagall eyed him shrewdly. "If I may hazard a guess, I would say that you are a natural in charms." Harry could only look at her wide-eyed.

"Don't look so surprised, Mr. Potter," McGonagall chuckled. "The way you performed your transfiguration is precisely the correct way to perform most charms. Charms require a moment of most intense focus and a concentration of power, whereas transfiguration requires much more... finesse."

Harry nodded thoughtfully before turning back to the Raven on the desk. Concentrating, he flicked his wand more gently at the Raven, which began to morph before stopping halfway in-between.

"For a first attempt, that is remarkable Mr. Potter," McGonagall, said, completing the change with her own wand. "I would recommend starting with slightly less intensive transfigurations to begin with, but considering that attempt you should have no trouble catching up with

the class in the next few months.” She got up and led Harry to the door.

“I can’t thank you enough for this, Professor,” said Harry earnestly. “This is really going to help me out.”

“You’re very welcome, Mr. Potter,” McGonagall replied with a smile. “Now, if you will rejoin your housemates, we can continue the lesson.”

Harry nodded and returned to his seat at the front of the room, inwardly jumping for joy that he may have finally found the answer to his conjuring problem.

Harry spent the rest of the day studying and practicing in three separate areas. The first was working on this new method of transfiguration. Which, while definitely not what he was used to, required far less power and concentration, and was therefore much easier to learn. The second area he studied was the warding style he read from the book he’d stolen. As loathe as he was to admit it, it appeared that Dumbledore had been at least partially right when he said that wards were too complicated, as Harry was having a very difficult time working out their specifics. Still, he had nothing but time on his hands, and resolved to continue working on the book whenever he could.

The third and final thing Harry was preparing for involved Malfoy’s upcoming attack. In charms, Harry had caught Malfoy glaring at him and decided to probe the boy’s mind, only to withdraw quite hastily when he found some very rudimentary occlumency defenses. He had scanned Crabbe and Goyle instead, but found that both of them were seemingly only thinking about food since Charms was right before lunch. Harry, therefore, continued with his original plan, and found that part of him was actually looking forward to putting Malfoy in his place once and for all.

Because the attack was scheduled for Monday, Harry spent the majority of his weekend in the library as well, breaking only when he needed to find a classroom to practice something. He had told Row about the impending confrontation, and Row had agreed to keep the rest of her friends out of his hair until it was over.

On Sunday, Harry took a break from his spell work and contacted Jack on his messenger, briefly telling him about the upcoming attack and asking what he thought.

So basically they're trying to show you who the boss is and make you fall in line, right? Jack asked.

Exactly. I believe his exact words were "you'll see who runs Slytherin house soon enough."

Well, you know what you have to do right? You have to make an example out of him. It's not enough to beat him, you have to humiliate him.

Yeah, I know. I'm afraid that if I show any weakness at all, the rest of the house will eat me alive.

Then don't show weakness. Think of it like those nature shows, you're fighting for dominance here, there's no room for fair play. Crush him, plain and simple.

I was thinking the same thing, but I wanted to see if you had an alternative. I guarantee this will cause me more problems down the line, especially with the git's father and Snape.

Well, you have a choice. You can let him get away with acting like he does, or you can put him in his place and face the consequences. Since you never let anybody get away with anything on you, I'm guessing you'll face the consequences.

My thoughts exactly.

Plus the girls will think it's dead sexy.

That's the least of my concerns right now.

Still, you might enjoy the effects later. Row's right about one thing, you really should get a girlfriend.

Why do you guys keep saying that?

You need to lighten up, Harry. I don't know why life seems to have it in for you, but you can't let it turn you into just a shell. Trust me, having a girlfriend is one of the best feelings there is.

That might be a little tough, since the girls in my house hate me and the rest of the school is afraid I'm going to kill them in their sleep.

Price you pay for being you, I guess. Still, I'm sure you'll have a few chances to get to know girls this year. Trust me on this: go for it. You'll thank me later.

If I ever get to the point where I can think about a girlfriend, I promise I'll talk to you about it.

You should, the ladies love me.

Ok, I'll talk to you later.

Putting away the messenger, Harry resumed his preparations for the next day. By Sunday night, Harry was confident that tomorrow would be a day that Malfoy would regret for a long time to come.

The Slytherins had only one class after lunch on Monday: double Defense Against the Dark Arts. Harry was greeted by a smiling Remus Lupin when he entered, although he saw Lupin's smile slip slightly when he glanced at the house crest on Harry's uniform.

Harry spent most of the class mentally preparing himself for what was to come. He heard Lupin give his introduction speech, but once he told them to take out their textbooks he tuned him out. Harry was so engrossed in his preparations that he didn't notice the class was about to end until the bell rang.

"Mr. Potter," said Lupin as he got up to leave. "If you could stay a moment."

Harry could hardly believe his luck. By holding him back, Lupin was guaranteeing that Harry would be able to enter the common room

alone, and it would force Malfoy to alter his plans while playing right in to Harry's.

"Of course, Professor," he said, waiting by his desk.

"Now then, Harry," Lupin said, taking a seat on his desk. "I was wondering how Hogwarts is treating you?"

"Can't complain, I suppose," said Harry honestly, before narrowing his eyes. "I certainly haven't seen Sirius Black yet."

Lupin winced. "Harry, I really am sorry about that. You must know that the headmaster strictly forbade me from telling you the truth. I didn't want to lie to you Harry, but Albus-

"I get it," Harry interrupted quietly. "Dumbledore only wanted you to tell me the good things, so that I wanted to return. But you listened to him, and you lied to me," Harry said, looking Lupin in the eye. "I'm sure he already told you about how Snape got me here," at Lupin's questioning expression he snorted. "Or maybe not. You should ask the headmaster about that. Anyway, I'm not here by choice, but I am planning to make the most of the time I'm here. I don't like that you lied to me, but I'm willing to give you another chance, and you can start by teaching me everything you know about the Patronus Charm."

"The Patronus Charm," exclaimed Lupin. "Harry, I seriously doubt that there has ever been a wizard your age that could successfully cast that spell."

"Nevertheless, I want you to teach it to me. Not just the charm itself, I want to know everything about it, and everything about dementors, as well." His gaze hardened. "Believe what you will, that dementor on the train was doing more than just search, and I intend to be ready to face one again, especially now that they're at Hogwarts."

Lupin considered Harry thoughtfully for a moment before nodding his head in agreement.

“Very well, Harry. I’ll teach you what I can. Shall we say, Thursday nights around 7?”

“That will do,” Harry said curtly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have something to attend to.” At Lupin’s nod, Harry made his way out of the classroom and started down towards the dungeons.

When he reached the hall that eventually lead to the Slytherin common room, Harry stopped and drew his wand. With careful precision born from hours of practice, he conjured four cobras, each about a meter and a half in length. He had carefully selected this particular cobra, as its venom was only lethal if left untreated for 48 hours or more, but one bite instantly left the victim almost completely paralyzed.

Once the snakes were conjured, he told them to wait patiently while he performed an enlargement charm on each one, tripling their size. Harry stood back and marveled for a moment at exactly how intimidating a 15 foot snake was, before he hissed his instructions. With a thought, he made each of the four snakes invisible and allowed one to coil itself around him while the others followed him, one to each side and one in front. He resumed his walk down the hall, noticing after a little while that someone far in front of him ran out of the shadows and down toward the common area.

When he had almost reached the door to the Slytherin common room, Harry briefly recognized that he’d already found one slight miscalculation in his plan.

This thing is a lot heavier that I imagined, he thought to himself, wincing as he readjusted the cobra’s weight on his shoulders. Deciding it wouldn’t be prudent to fight with the snake around him, he ordered it to follow closely behind and watch his back. With a deep breath, he walked up to the wall and gave the password before walking into the Slytherin Common room, wand drawn and ready.

Instantly, he sensed incoming spells and whipped his wand forward.

“Contego,” he said quietly, watching in satisfaction as three spells dissipated on his shield. Turning quickly to his immediate right, he

fired a stunner that hit Pansy Parkinson in the chest as she tried to sneak behind him. Smirking slightly, he turned back to Malfoy just in time to block another round of curses.

“You know what, Malfoy?” He said calmly as Crabbe and Goyle flanked him. “I think it’s time that we settle this, once and for all. And after today,” Harry’s voice became a cold hiss and his eyes hardened to green chips of raging power. “You will fear me.”

“Fear you, Potter!” Malfoy spat incredulously. “You’re the one who should be afraid. Look around, nobody wants you here. You’re no Slytherin, and now,” he smirked evilly and gestured to the boy to his side. “We get to teach you a lesson. Let’s go, Flint.”

Malfoy and the older boy next to him began to advance on Harry, at the same time Crabbe, Goyle, and another boy Harry didn’t recognize approached him from the sides. Harry threw up another contego shield to absorb the first round of curses before he drew himself up to his full height and spoke with a voice laced with pure power.

“So be it.” –ATTACK!-- He hissed in parseltongue, simultaneously removing the invisibility from his cobra friends.

Immediately, the snakes on either side of him whipped their heads forward menacingly, causing Crabbe, Goyle, and the third boy to jump back in fright. Malfoy, too, recoiled in fear, but Flint immediately shot a reductor curse at the lead snake, causing Harry to throw a hasty shield over it. The shield shattered, but absorbed enough of the blow that it only served to make the snake angry. Flint started to cast another curse, but collapsed when Harry hit him with a stunner.

Regaining his composure, Malfoy started throwing everything he could at the snake in front of him, and succeeded in severing it in half before Harry caught him with a disarming charm and a body bind. Harry turned quickly to his right to find that Goyle and his partner had dispatched the other snake, but Goyle had been bitten in the process and was now paralyzed.

“Stupefy!” The other boy yelled, sending a stunner at Harry.

“Protego, Expelliarmus,” Harry returned the boy’s stunner and followed it with his own disarming charm, sending the boy crashing back into the wall. Harry deftly caught the boy’s wand before hitting him with a body bind as well. He was about to turn to his left, when he sensed an attack from behind him and fell to the ground before rolling to his right and coming up facing his attacker, who turned out to be a very large, very ugly girl.

“Expelliarmus!” She cried, trying again. Harry waved his wand almost lazily and the girl was hit with her own spell before she too, was petrified.

Still alert for another attack, Harry turned to survey the room. He had two girls bound behind him, one unconscious, and two boys to his right that were equally incapacitated. A quick look to his left showed that Crabbe had been unable to fight off the snake, and was now paralyzed with the cobra wrapped around his body possessively. Malfoy was still bound and laying next to an unconscious Flint, but neither had been bitten...yet.

Overall, Harry had lost two of his four snakes, the last of which was beginning to curl around his body lovingly, a fact that earned him many feared looks from the Slytherins around the room.

Since the start of the battle, the room had filled up with students coming down from the dorms, and now nearly all of Slytherin house was arranged around the makeshift battle field.

--Come to me-- Harry hissed to snake that was still hovering over Crabbe. As it complied, Harry levitated all of his attackers so that they were arranged in front of him against a wall. Checking to make sure he had all their wands, he secured all the ones that hadn’t been bitten to the wall using a binding charm. Crabbe and Goyle, both of whom had been bitten and were paralyzed, he laid at their feet.

“So, this is the might of Draco Malfoy,” he said quietly. “Pathetic. You serve only to embarrass yourself and get your friends killed.” He chuckled coldly at Malfoy’s widening eyes. “Oh, yes, the cobra’s

venom will kill if left untreated. I haven't decided yet whether you should join them..." He turned his head to look at the snake that was curled around him and stroked its head.

--It scares them when we talk.-- he hissed. --So I'm just going to talk for a while.-- He gestured to Malfoy. --Would you like to bite him?--

--Let me bite him master-- the snake hissed back eagerly.

--No, let me bite him master-- the other snake said, curling around his leg.

--You can bite the black headed one-- Harry hissed to the other snake. --curl yourself around them, both of you, but do not bite until I say--

As the snakes made their way towards Malfoy and Flint, Harry enervated Flint and removed the body bind from Malfoy.

"You'll pay for this Potter--"

--SILENCE!-- Harry hissed venomously. Shocked by the parseltongue, Malfoy choked on his own words and Flint closed his eyes and started praying.

"I will pay for nothing, idiot," Harry spat at Malfoy. "You say I am no Slytherin? I have Slytherin's gift, fool!" Harry turned to look at the rest of the room. "How can you possibly be scared of such a brainless twit? Look at him, about to wet himself with fear! This is the man who claims he runs Slytherin house? HE IS WEAK!" Harry roared. "A weak, pathetic, fool who feeds of his family name like a vulture. This is the great scion of the Malfoy family!"

"Get this snake off me!" Malfoy cried in a high pitched voice.

"I don't think so," Harry said menacingly. "I promised that you would fear me. Are you afraid Draco?"

Malfoy shut his eyes and Harry could see tears leaking from the corners.

--Touch his face-- Harry hissed. The snake around Malfoy wormed its way up so that it was level with his face and flicked its tongue out. Malfoy let out a sob but kept his eyes screwed shut.

"Are you afraid yet, Malfoy?" Harry said in his ear. "Are you scared?"

"YES!" Malfoy screamed, crying. "I'M SCARED OK! JUST MAKE IT STOP!"

--Move back down-- Harry hissed. The snake complied, but Malfoy continued his hysterical breathing interspersed with sobs.

"This is your leader?" Harry said to the room at large. He shook his head and his voice grew cold again. "I hate bullies, and I hate bigots. You, Malfoy, are both. If you attack me again, this will feel like a picnic. TO ALL OF YOU!" He roared to the room. "You don't like me? Fine, I don't care. If you stay out of my way, then I'll stay out of yours. And if any of you are even THINKING of trying to push me around, remember this," he turned back to Malfoy and Flint. "I won't always be as merciful." --BITE THEM-- He hissed violently.

"NYAAHH!" Draco screamed as the snake whipped forward and buried its fangs in his neck. Harry watched as Malfoy's body started to seize up, reducing his hysterical sobs to a choked gurgle. There was a shocked silence from the rest of the room as the snakes slid off their victims, both looking very satisfied.

--Thank you my friends-- Harry hissed before banishing them. He undid the binding charm and let the bodies fall to the floor before turning to Pansy Parkinson.

"You might want to make sure they get to the hospital wing," he said casually to the terrified girl. "I really don't care if they die, but you probably do." He stood up and looked over the rest of the room. "I meant what I said," he called loudly. "I know not all of you agree with this scum," he said, gesturing to Malfoy. "So don't act like you do out of fear. After all," he said, his eyes narrowing. "I'll hurt you much worse than he will."

With that, he turned and tried to exit the room but found that the door wouldn't open.

"I-It's s-s-spelled shut," Parkinson whimpered, before clearing her throat. "Potter stinks." She said clearly, and the door promptly opened.

"How..." Harry muttered to himself. "I thought only Professors could.." Abruptly the answer came to him and he growled before storming out into the hall.

Harry walked swiftly through the halls, still full of energy from the battle. When he was a safe distance from the common room, he allowed the adrenaline to leave his body and leaned against the nearest wall as a dizzy spell hit him. Thinking back to the last time he had used this much magic in combat, he was surprised to find that while he was tired, he wasn't nearly as exhausted as he had been after the fight with the basilisk. Of course, he had been much better prepared for this battle, and the fact that he now used a wand increased the amount of magic he could do significantly.

Despite his earlier performance, Harry had no wish to kill anyone, least of all a child, and therefore when he was done resting he made his way to the hospital wing where he provided Madame Pomfrey with the correct anti-venom for the bitten children. That done, he walked to the headmaster's office and once again gave the password to the gargoyle, thinking that he must be setting some sort of record for most visits in a week.

"Come in, Harry," came the headmaster's voice when he knocked.

Mentally preparing himself for the inevitable confrontation, Harry entered and promptly took a seat at the far end of the headmaster's desk, causing Dumbledore to raise an eyebrow.

"Lemon drop?" The headmaster asked. Harry shook his head.

"Well then, may I ask why you are here?"

"You remember the conversation we had on Friday, about Draco Malfoy ending up in the hospital wing?" Dumbledore eyed Harry

questioningly and Harry nodded. "Yeah, he's there right now, and so are Crabbe, Goyle, and some guy named Flint. They set up an ambush for me after our defense class today."

"Judging from your appearance, I would guess they did not succeed?"

"You would guess correctly."

"Very well," Dumbledore nodded sadly. "It would appear that your assumptions were correct. I did inform Prof-"

"I know what you did," Harry interrupted dismissively. "You told Professor Snape, who told Malfoy that I suspected something and then offered to seal the door to the Slytherin common room so that I couldn't get out when they ambushed me."

Dumbledore regarded Harry with an unreadable expression.

"That is a very serious accusation, Harry. What leads to believe that Professor Snape was involved?"

"Only the fact that the door to the Slytherin common room had been sealed to keep people in, and that the password was 'Potter stinks.' Of course, I suppose it could have been Professor McGonagall," he said sarcastically.

Dumbledore shook his head and made to speak, but was cut off when a chime sounded. Knowing that could only mean one thing, Harry carefully moved his wand into his hand and got to his feet. A moment later, the door to the office was flung open and an enraged looking Severus Snape entered.

"YOU!" He yelled when his eyes landed on Harry. "YOU MISERABLE, ARROGANT BRAT! HOW DARE YOU ATTACK MY STUDENTS!" He started to advance on Harry, wand drawn.

"SEVERUS!" Dumbledore barked, making him stop in his tracks. "Sit, and we will discuss this rationally. Now." He said, when Snape made

no move to sit. Finally, Snape lowered his wand and took the seat farthest away from Harry, who remained standing.

“Now,” Dumbledore began. “If one of you could please tell me exactly what happened and exactly why Mr. Malfoy is in the hospital wing?”

“The brat’s a parseltongue, headmaster!” Snape sneered. “He ordered a giant snake to attack Draco and his friends in the common room and bite them. The venom instantly paralyzes, and is lethal if left untreated. He tried to kill them!” Snape finished with a shout.

“Indeed?” If Dumbledore was surprised by the news, he did not show it. “Is this true, Mr. Potter?”

“Mostly,” Harry shrugged. “Of course, he neglected to mention that I walked into an ambush that he helped set up.”

Snape’s eye twitched slightly, but outwardly he retained his sneer.

“Just like a Potter, trying to shift the blame!” He spat.

“I’m not trying to shift anything,” Harry replied, annoyed. “I ordered the snakes to attack everyone who was attacking me, and they bit Malfoy, Flint, Crabbe, and Goyle. I don’t regret it and if they attack me again, I’ll do much worse.”

“You see!” Snape shouted triumphantly. “I told you bringing him here was a mistake, headmaster! He should be expelled immediately and arrested for attempted murder!”

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” Harry asked incredulously. “You’ve hated me since the first time I saw you, and I have no idea why. Is it because I helped save the family that you abandoned? Or do you just hate children in general? How are you even a professor here?”

“I do believe that now would be the best time for you to show us what happened,” Dumbledore broke in calmly, silencing Snape’s angry retort. At Harry’s confused look, Dumbledore flicked his wand and a large stone basin floated over to his desk from one of the office

cabinets. "This, Harry, is a penseive, it is used to view memories. Since you are already adept at occlumency, this is what I need you to do." Dumbledore gave Harry the instructions for visualizing the proper memory and transferring it to his wand, and watched as Harry placed the memory in the bowl. "Now, we will all touch our wands to the bowl and watch the memory." Harry waited until Snape had done so before following, and abruptly found himself viewing his memory of Malfoy's attack.

When the three wizards emerged, Dumbledore had an unreadable expression on his face and Snape looked pale and....scared?

"Severus, I am very disappointed in you," Dumbledore said sadly. "I warned you of Harry's suspicions, and yet you did exactly as he predicted you would, even going so far as to seal the door to prevent his escape."

"Headmaster, I-"

"No, Severus," Dumbledore said, holding up a hand. "You have let your prejudice and your temper dictate your actions towards Mr. Potter for too long," Dumbledore replied sternly. "You went against my explicit instructions and blackmailed him into coming to Hogwarts, and then you ignored me once again and abused your position as a professor to set him up in an ambush. Do you truly have so little respect for me, Severus?" Snape looked so miserable, for a moment Harry thought he was actually going to cry. He opened his mouth but Dumbledore continued. "I am placing you on probation, effective immediately. If you continue to treat Mr. Potter as you have, I will have you removed from the staff and I will teach your classes myself." Dumbledore turned to Harry. "Please excuse us for a moment, Harry. You are welcome to wait in my chambers, right through that door." Harry nodded slowly and walked to where Dumbledore had pointed. When he had gone, Dumbledore cast an imperturbable charm on the door and turned back to Snape.

"I have given you more than your fair share of leeway over the years, Severus," he continued quietly. "I allow you to favor your house as you have because I understand that most of the other houses are biased in the opposite direction. And yet, according to young Harry,

the result is that Mr. Malfoy and those that support him rule Slytherin house by fear. That, I will not allow. Mr. Malfoy and everyone else that participated in the attack will receive a month's detention. Mr. Potter will also receive detention, but only two weeks worth, and none of the detentions will be served with you. I cannot stress this enough, Severus: Harry Potter is not James Potter. If you allow yourself to examine his actions with your usual intelligence, you will see that he has none of the playful mischief in him that defined his father." Dumbledore looked at Snape sadly. "He has known only violence in his life, Severus, and he will react violently if he feels threatened. We must make sure that does not happen."

When the headmaster was finished, Snape appeared to struggle with a number of possible retorts, but decided on silence. Dumbledore dismissed him and he made his way back to the dungeons deep in thought.

Dumbledore flicked his wand to open the door to his chambers and called Harry back into the room.

"Harry, I cannot express how disappointed I am in Professor Snape for assisting in your attack. I noticed from your memory that you appeared to know exactly what to expect. Is that the reason you warned me about Professor Snape and Mr. Malfoy? Did you already know what they were planning?"

Harry shook his head. "I found out the details after I spoke to you about my suspicions." He said calmly. "I'd already told you what was going to happen, and I knew you wouldn't prevent it. Don't deny it," he said quickly, cutting off Dumbledore's objection. "You told Professor Snape, just as I knew you would. Why would I risk you telling him that I knew the plan? He would have told Malfoy, and I would have been attacked later, and probably wouldn't have fared as well."

Dumbledore sighed heavily. "Unfortunately, I believe you are correct." He looked at Harry sadly. "However, although your actions were effective, they were also quite brutal. Despite your desire for revenge, you cannot rely on strength alone to solve your problems, Harry; violence should always be used only as a last resort."

Harry regarded the headmaster coldly. "What would you have me do? Talk Malfoy into letting me be one of his faithful lackeys? The only thing he respects is power, and you know it. I knew what I was signing up for when I picked Slytherin, and I'll not shy away from it now." He held the headmaster's gaze firmly. "You say I use violence to solve my problems? I say I attract violent problems." He shook his head. "You cannot reason with people whose only goal is to dominate. Malfoy is both arrogant and a bigot; he believes that everyone else is beneath him and will treat them as such until they prove him wrong, and violence is the only way to do that. Do you know that there are members of Slytherin house who feel obligated to refer to muggleborns as mudbloods? If they don't, Malfoy gets suspicious, and nobody wants that. He thrives on fear, hate, and just about every other negative human emotion, and yet you say that I'm the one with the problem?" He snorted. "I will not abide bullies, headmaster, in any form. Anyone who uses fear to subdue others around me will regret it."

"That is a very noble sentiment, Harry," Dumbledore replied thoughtfully. "But what gives you the right to decide how others should act? True, you are stronger than Mr. Malfoy, but if you use your superior power to force him to follow you, are you not as guilty as he?"

Harry frowned. "It's not the same thing. I don't care how he acts or how he thinks, as long as he doesn't try to force it on others. My goal is to protect the people he threatens, not to force him to agree with me."

"That is a fine line you walk."

"That's true," Harry agreed. "But the alternative is to do nothing, and that is unacceptable."

"Of course," Dumbledore inclined his head slightly. "However, there are other ways to protect those that are threatened. If you take it upon yourself to personally punish every bully, you will soon find yourself doing nothing else."

“What are you trying to say?”

“What I’m saying, Harry, is that although your intentions are noble, you rely too much on violence to solve your problems,” Dumbledore replied sagely. “I am also saying that given your past, I do not blame you for it.” Harry’s eyes widened slightly and Dumbledore nodded. “I do not presume to know how bad it was for you before you ran away,” he said sadly, “but I do know that you have had to rely on yourself for far too long. I want you to know that you have support here at Hogwarts, and you no longer have to deal with all your problems alone.”

Harry eyed the headmaster carefully. “While I certainly appreciate the sentiment, you’ll have to excuse me for being skeptical.” He said slowly. “Every person at Hogwarts that I’ve had contact with has tried to manipulate me in one way or another. You, Professor Snape, Remus, each of you has your own agenda for me, so you’ll forgive me if I’m wary of your offer; it seems a little too much like Greeks bearing gifts.” He said sarcastically. “You say you know how I grew up?” His eyes hardened. “You know nothing. And you will continue to know nothing, unless I decide otherwise. When you decide to treat me like an equal instead of your subordinate, maybe we can talk. Until then, don’t be surprised if I seem less than anxious to justify my actions to you.”

“I do not ask that you justify your actions to me, Harry,” Dumbledore replied quietly. “In the same manner that I am not required to justify my actions to you.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed but Dumbledore continued.

“Consider this,” he began, changing tactics. “When you decided to brave the Chamber of Secrets and rescue Miss Weasley, you told Miss Thomas to wait for you, correct?”

Harry nodded slowly, wondering where this was going.

“Why did you tell her to wait? Should it not have been her decision whether or not to come with you?”

Harry frowned.

"I'm a better fighter, and she was my responsibility. It was safer for me to go alone."

"Indeed it was, but that still doesn't negate the fact that you made the decision for her and took the choice out of her hands. Did you tell her all your concerns about what could happen in the chamber? Did you explain everything you knew about the situation and let her decide?" Harry shook his head slowly. "So rather than explain yourself, you made what you believed to be the best decision, correct?"

"Her safety is my responsibility," Harry replied, confused. "I made the only decision I could. I don't see where you're going with this."

"What I am getting at, Harry, is that you made a decision for your sister because you believed it was your decision to make, and that it would keep her safe. But what if the basilisk was no longer in the chamber? What if it was out in the school, and encountered Miss Thomas as it made its way back? Then your decision to leave her behind to keep her from danger would have actually been putting her in danger; completely the opposite of what you intended."

"Then I would have been a failure, and anything that happened would be my fault" Harry said simply.

"Fault is not what's important, Harry," Dumbledore replied. "What's important is that you considered yourself more qualified to make such a decision than your sister, despite the fact that it was her safety in question. You understand what it means to make a decision involving someone you feel responsible for; you recognize the weight of responsibility that comes with being charged with someone else's protection."

"I suppose," Harry said carefully. "Yes, I do."

"Harry, I am responsible for the safety of every student in this school, in exactly the same manner that you feel you are responsible for your sister," Dumbledore said honestly. "I understand that you are upset that I seem less than honest with you at times, but my position is very

similar to yours with Miss Thomas. I do not always have the luxury of explaining myself and my actions to those whose safety I am charged with." He regarded Harry thoughtfully. "So you see that in a situation like this, I am responsible for both your safety and Mr. Malfoy's, presenting a dilemma."

"You can forget being responsible for me," Harry replied firmly. "I can take care of myself just fine."

"You can handle yourself in a fight, to be sure," Dumbledore replied, nodding. "However, the only sure way to win a fight is to avoid it. And that is a lesson that you have yet to learn."

Harry scowled. "Some fights can't be avoided, only postponed. Since we've already established that I can't trust you, can we get back on topic?"

Dumbledore sighed heavily.

"Harry, I understand that I have made many mistakes regarding you, and I am not asking that you trust me immediately. In fact, I am not even asking that you trust me at all. What I am asking is that you allow yourself to make friends here at Hogwarts, and that you allow the people that care about you to help you with your burdens. I will continue to do everything in my power to protect you and every other Hogwarts student. But you must know that there are many more professors than just I that are concerned for your welfare, Harry. All I ask is that you give them the chance." He eyed Harry earnestly before continuing. "Now, I have already assigned Mr. Malfoy and the others who attacked you a month of detention. I am also assigning you two weeks of detention, but not as a punishment." At Harry's confused look, he continued. "I am assigning you two weeks of detention to be served with the heads of the other three houses at their leisure, all of whom have demonstrated a sincere interest in your well-being. They will use this time to get to know you and to introduce you to some of their more prominent students. I hope that this will not only serve to cut down on the ridiculous rumors that are circulating the school regarding you, but also help you see that there are others at Hogwarts that are worthy of your friendship, and your respect."

Harry regarded the headmaster thoughtfully.

"And if I refuse?"

"If you refuse, then I have not explained myself correctly," Dumbledore replied after a short pause. "You are being given a unique opportunity to overcome the traditional boundaries that divide the student body and to form relationships that can benefit you greatly. If you honestly wish to refuse, I must have misspoke."

"I'm not making any promises," Harry said carefully.

"I did not expect you to," Dumbledore replied. "I only ask that you go into these meetings with an open mind."

Harry thought about it for a moment before nodding.

"Very well. But know this," He said seriously. "If they treat me like an enemy, I'll treat them like one as well."

With that, Harry turned and strode purposefully out of the office, leaving an exhausted headmaster behind.

Albus Dumbledore was stumped. Never in all his years of teaching had he had a student that he needed as much as he needed Harry Potter, but talking with the boy was like beating his head against a brick wall! Watching him veritably destroy Mr. Malfoy and his friends sent shivers up the headmaster's spine as he thought about the last student he'd seen with Harry's talent, and how that student had turned Slytherin house into his own private army to loose terror upon the world. Now, here he sat, with another boy whose talent far exceeded his years, who had grown up abused by muggles, and who, like Tom Riddle before him, wore the green and silver uniform of Slytherin house. And yet, as similar as they were in some ways, they were totally opposite in others.

Tom Riddle hid his true intentions from everyone, and spun web upon web of lies designed to prevent anyone from finding out his goals. Riddle never made waves, and always appeared the perfect student. He was a prefect, head boy, and was almost universally looked up to

by everyone in the school, all the while harboring a vicious streak behind the mask he presented to the world. Dumbledore doubted that Tom Riddle had ever spoken an honest word in his life.

Harry Potter, on the other hand, was so honest it was almost brutal. He made no effort to hide his feelings, his intentions, or what he would do if he was pushed. He had told the headmaster specifically that Draco Malfoy would attack him, and that the boy would end up in the hospital wing. When he was proven correct, he walked into the headmaster's office completely calm and unrepentant, stating quite succinctly that he had indeed ordered poisonous snakes to attack his fellow students, and that he would do worse if they threatened him again. Where Tom Riddle had been slick and slippery, Harry Potter was blunt and hard. Dumbledore thought that maybe this meant there was still hope. Thinking back to the cold look he'd seen in those green eyes, he could only pray that he was right.

Dumbledore sighed and leaned back in his chair. As much as he hoped that the similarities between Harry Potter and Tom Riddle would prove to be nothing, he had to find more information. He had hoped that the boy would be sorted into Gryffindor like his parents, and that he would grow into the role that Albus knew he was destined to fulfill. His going into Slytherin not only made the headmaster extremely nervous, but also virtually guaranteed that he would be looked at with suspicion rather than admiration by the rest of the school. Shaking his head, Dumbledore decided two things: first, he would have to meet Jack Thomas and see what he could learn about Harry, and second, he would have to pay another visit to Vernon and Petunia Dursley.

A/N So there it is. About the Transfiguration thing, since Harry learned everything for himself, I think it's realistic that while he figured out how to do transfiguration, he didn't figure out how to do it most efficiently. I also figured it made more sense if those two branches of magic required a different skill set to perform them optimally.

Ok, this is the schedule I made up. (Thanks to Master Slytherin for pointing out the correct format). I have no idea if this is even close to correct, but it made sense to me and hopefully I won't notice some giant screw-up and have to change it later. No promises though. ;-)

Each single lesson is 50 minutes long.

Monday: Transfiguration – Charms – Double History of Magic –
LUNCH – Double DADA

Tuesday: Double Potions – Double Herbology – LUNCH – DADA –
Double Ancient Runes

Wednesday: Transfiguration – Charms – Double History of Magic –
LUNCH – Double Potions, DADA

Thursday: Double Herbology – Double Arithmancy – LUNCH –
Double Ancient Runes

Friday: Double Transfiguration – Double Charms – LUNCH – Double
Arithmancy – Astronomy (midnight)

Harry left the headmaster's office wondering if it really was a mistake for him to come to Hogwarts after all. With a thought, he turned himself invisible and made his way out onto the grounds to think. As he walked, he found himself enjoying his first real look at the Hogwarts scenery, and as cliché as it sounded, it really was beautiful. Looking out across the lake, he contemplated what he would do next.

He'd humiliated Malfoy and his goons completely, and he hoped that by doing so the stranglehold that Malfoy had on Slytherin house as a whole would be broken. The first thing he needed to do was evaluate what effects the incident had on the people who had seen it, but to do that he would need to actually talk to somebody, and that could be problematic.

He sighed. Even if he'd successfully destroyed Malfoy's reputation, he was going to have to deal with the fallout from his actions, and he would almost certainly have to face off against Malfoy Sr. at some point in the future. He wondered if he'd done the right thing by being so blunt with the headmaster; but then again, he really didn't know how to be anything else. Even if he did get expelled, it would be far from the end of the world.

Shrugging to himself, Harry started back inside and down toward the Slytherin common room, removing the invisibility as he went. It would be time for dinner soon, and Harry planned on using the time to observe what changes, if any, had happened as a result of the incident with Malfoy.

When he reached the door, he gave the password and walked slowly into the common room, sighing to himself as the room suddenly became silent.

Walking slowly, he made his way across the room, noticing as he did so that none of the students would meet his eyes. When he reached the door to the 3rd year dorms, he walked in and flopped down on his bed, exhaling loudly. He was just about to use his messenger to contact Row when the door opened and Blaise Zabini entered.

“Well, Potter,” He began carefully. “If your goal was to scare the shit out of everybody in Slytherin house, you did a pretty damn good job. Can I sit down?”

Harry nodded. “I really wasn’t trying to scare anybody but Malfoy,” he replied honestly. Blaise snorted.

“You expect me to believe that?”

“I don’t care what you believe, I made my point.”

“Probably, but Malfoy always has been a little slow, if you take my meaning.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “If he’s that stupid, next time I’ll really hurt him.”

“Really hurt him?” Blaise asked incredulously. “Isn’t he poisoned right now?”

“He’ll be fine,” Harry said dismissively. “Madame Pomfrey has the anti-venom already. They’ll all be back within a week, fully healed.”

Blaise eyed him approvingly. “How very Slytherin of you, Potter; making everybody think they were dying when you had everything under control the whole time. I’m impressed.” Harry just shrugged, and the two sat in silence for a moment.

“Blaise, if there’s something you want to know, just ask,” Harry said when the silence began to drag on.

Blaise chuckled. “That obvious, am I?” Harry shrugged and he continued. “I’m just wondering if you really belong in Slytherin.”

Harry frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well, think about it,” Blaise began. “I mean, Professor Snape is the only professor that ever helps us, and he hates you. Not only that, but he tries to give you detention and you flat out refuse, apparently with no repercussions. The only way that could have happened is if you

went to Dumbledore, and he would never help a Slytherin. There's a reason that Slytherins stick together, Potter; the other houses might fear us as a group, but they hate us individually. A lone Slytherin wouldn't last a week."

Harry was silent for a moment before he answered.

"You remember what I said in the common room?" Blaise nodded slowly. "I meant every word. I'm a Slytherin for a reason, like it or not, but I also meant what I said about bullies, and I could care less what house they're from. Anybody who thinks I'm an easy target because I'm a lone Slytherin will learn the same lesson as Malfoy."

Blaise looked like he was trying very hard not to grin.

"No offense Potter, but there are a couple of Gryffindors that I'm really hoping get on your bad side."

Harry frowned. "You'll forgive me if I hope that doesn't happen." He looked at Blaise thoughtfully. "Ok, I answered your question, so now you can answer one of mine. How much damage did I do to Malfoy's reputation, and how strong is his support now?"

Blaise looked thoughtful for a moment before answering.

"I really shouldn't answer that," he said carefully. "I'll tell you what, you agree to answer the rest of my questions, and I'll tell you what you want to know about Malfoy."

Harry considered the offer.

"How about we take turns?" He countered. "I answer one for you, then you answer one for me." Blaise agreed and the two shook on it before he answered Harry's question.

"Well, Malfoy will always have supporters," he said thoughtfully. "He has too many family allies that go back too far to lose them all. But what you did today took away all the credibility and fear he used with the students from lesser families, and there are a lot of those."

Essentially, you've knocked him off his throne, but he's not completely out of the game."

"What about you and Tracey?"

Blaise smirked. "Let's just say I've made my choice on who I'd rather have as an enemy, and it's not you." He replied. "With the demonstration you put on today, you're going to have a lot of people trying to be your friend. At least you will once I deliver my impromptu report." Harry nodded.

"Report?"

"You didn't think I was the only one with questions, did you?"

"Ah, I see," said Harry knowingly. "Since you're the one who talked to me, you'll be the unofficial Harry Potter expert with the rest of the house."

"Something like that," Blaise replied. "Now, where did you get the snakes?"

"I conjured them and then used engorgement charms. Who are Malfoy's permanent allies?"

"I knew you didn't conjure four snakes that size," Blaise muttered before answering. "Everybody who attacked you today, with the exception of Millicent Bulstrode, will stand behind Malfoy no matter what. Greengrass and Nott are definitely more likely to join his side than yours, but they aren't loyal to anything outside their family; same thing with most of the older students. Speaking of which, what about those shields you were using? Even most of the seventh years were saying that they couldn't do them that well."

"I studied a lot of magic before I came here," Harry replied carefully. "Since I've been here, shields have been one of the things I've been focusing on. I'm sure you've noticed that I never spend my free time in the common room?" Blaise nodded. "That's because I study a lot. Ask a Ravenclaw; you can usually find me in the library."

“Fair enough,” said Blaise, nodding. “Now for the important stuff.” He leaned forward. “There are a lot of us in Slytherin house whose families don’t see eye to eye with the headmaster. Frankly, they probably don’t see eye to eye with you either, if our earlier conversation is any indication. In any case, a lot of students are worried that you’re here as some type of enforcer for Dumbledore, and the fact that you put Malfoy in the hospital wing and didn’t get expelled only makes it seem more likely.” He considered Harry carefully. “Personally, I think you’re hiding something, but I don’t know whether it has something to do with Dumbledore or not. What I want to know is whether you can be trusted as a Slytherin.”

Harry looked Blaise in the eye, and it was all the other boy could do not to flinch.

“The only people in this castle that I’m concerned with are myself and my sister,” he said firmly. “I know Dumbledore has his own agenda, but I could care less what it has to do with me. I follow no one; that includes Dumbledore, Snape, Fudge, and it also includes whoever ends up running the show around here. There is no one in this school that has power over me, and that’s the way it will stay. Have I made myself clear?”

Blaise gulped and nodded slowly.

“Yeah, that clears it up.”

“Good,” Harry replied curtly. “Because if there are people under the delusion that I’m going to fall in line and conform to what they consider proper Slytherin behavior, there’s going to be a problem.”

Blaise had regained his composure and was now grinning.

“You know what, Potter?” He said. “I don’t know whether you being here will end up helping or hurting, but one thing I do know is that whatever happens, it definitely won’t be boring.” He looked down at his watch. “Bugger, it’s already past time for dinner.” He got up from his seat and looked at Harry thoughtfully. “Why don’t you sit with the rest of us tonight? It’ll give you a chance to see for yourself what allies you might have gained.”

Harry thought it over for a moment before he nodded and got up to follow Blaise down the stairs. When they entered the common room, Harry paused and prepared himself, just in case someone had waited behind hoping to catch him unawares. However, when he entered the room he found it completely deserted, and was forced to quicken his step to catch up to Blaise as he exited into the hallway. Assuming a position with the boy on his right, Harry made his way to the Great Hall for dinner.

As Blaise and Harry were making their way to dinner, Severus Snape was busy finishing his third glass of firewhisky.

Seeing Potter's memory in the penseive had brought forth memories he'd tried very hard to forget. Memories of a darker person and a darker time.

In his time as head of Slytherin house, he'd seen more than a few young boys that fashioned themselves as the next Dark Lord; a notion they had all been disabused of by the time they left Hogwarts. Each time it happened, it was all he could do not to grab the snot-nosed brats by the collar and slap some sense into them. He had seen the Dark Lord, had served him in some of the vilest ways imaginable. He had experienced, first hand, the absolute terror that a true Dark Lord inspired in those around him, and the ruthless malice he used to destroy everything in his path.

Pouring himself another glass, he thought about his former master. Any Death Eater could tell you, it wasn't mindless hate that made you fear Lord Voldemort; it was the meticulous way he twisted, tore, and crushed anything that opposed him. The Dark Lord had been a master of magical torture, to be sure, but simple fear of the cruciatus could only go so far. When Lord Voldemort put his mark on you, you were his completely; body, mind, and soul. He was a true master of manipulation, and of all the things that Severus Snape had done in his life, he was most proud of one thing: he had successfully left Lord Voldemort's service. He was the only one ever to do so.

He shivered. It took a lot to scare Severus Snape, but watching Harry Potter methodically destroy Draco Malfoy and his friends with poisonous snakes and parseltongue had brought back a lot of memories that the potions master hoped would stay buried forever. It was more than just the parseltongue, though. It was the way he'd used it and the snakes to inspire fear and gain the upper hand. It was the way he played to the crowd enough to keep them engaged, but not enough to lose control of the situation. It was the way he'd spoken calmly, coldly, and methodically, without even a hint of rage. Above all, it was the way he had absolutely dominated an entire room of older students with minimal effort, and how he left each and every one silently wondering if they were next.

He'd expected many things from 'the golden brat,' as he thought of him, but the ability to apply such brutal force with cold malevolence wasn't one of them. As he took a long drink from the glass, Severus Snape began to wonder for the first time just what in the hell he was going to do about Harry Potter.

Harry awoke the next morning early, as usual, and was marveling at the fact that he had yet to run into Malfoy in the morning when he remembered that the blond boy and his goons were still in the hospital wing. He took a moment to bask in the peaceful atmosphere before making his way down to breakfast, taking a seat in the typical third year section rather than his usual spot at the end.

The previous night's dinner had been eye-opening, if nothing else. While he had received his share of glares, most notably from Pansy Parkinson, the reception he received had been mostly positive as he found himself answering various questions from many of the older students. There was an overwhelming sense of wariness to those that initiated conversation with him, but once it became apparent that he wasn't going to start talking in parseltongue other students began to join in. When it was over, Harry knew he hadn't exactly made any friends, but at the very least they were no longer enemies. The table slowly began to fill around him, and many of the students gave him a nod or a brief greeting as they took their seat. When the bell rang

signaling the end of breakfast, Harry mentally steeled himself for confrontation as he made his way to the dungeons for double potions.

That day, a truly amazing thing happened for Harry: nothing. In potions, he spent the entire class on his guard, both mentally and physically, only to have Snape completely ignore him for the entire period. Harry didn't know whether it was the fact that he was on probation or something else, but whatever it was, he liked it, and could only hope it continued.

As the rest of the day passed, Harry found himself the recipient of even more odd stares and whispers than usual, and could only surmise that the incident with Malfoy had already spread around the castle. As he joined Row and her friends in the library later that evening, his fears were confirmed.

"Busy night?" Row asked with a smirk as Harry took a seat next to her.

"News sure travels fast around here," Harry muttered. "So, I assume that's why everyone has been looking at me like I was about to eat them?"

Row and Sarah giggled, but Padma and Hermione both fidgeted uncomfortably. Sighing, Harry decided it would be best to clear the air, and told them exactly what had happened in the common room with Malfoy.

When he was done, both girls had relaxed, but not completely.

"Well, that's part of what people are saying," Padma said carefully. "But they're also saying that you did it to take Malfoy's place. People are calling you the new Prince of Slytherin."

Harry sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"I should have known something like this would happen," he muttered. "Look, he attacked me, and I fought back. I didn't do it so that I could take his place, and I could care less what the rest of the school

thinks.” He looked at the other girls seriously. “Is this going to be a problem?”

The girls, spurred by Row’s warning glare, hastily denied it would be a problem, and the group went back to studying. As Hermione explained a particular charm to Row, Harry sighed to himself, knowing without a doubt that the fallout from the Malfoy incident was only just beginning.

The next day found Harry once more in a double period in the potions dungeons, and once again Snape acted like he simply didn’t exist. When the class ended Harry packed up his things and started toward the Defense classroom before he was stopped by Blaise Zabini.

“What happened between you and Professor Snape,” he asked curiously as the two resumed walking.

“Nothing really,” Harry shrugged. “Maybe Dumbledore told him to leave me alone.”

“Maybe,” Blaise replied skeptically.

“Going to try out for Quidditch, Potter?” Said Tracey Davis as she came up alongside the two boys.

Harry shook his head.

“I’ve never played. Never been a broom, actually.”

“Really?” Blaise asked incredulously. “That won’t do, you should have Madame Hooch get you into one of the first year lessons or something. Who knows, you might like it.”

“Maybe,” Harry replied, shrugging.

“Why not try it out?” Tracey said diplomatically. “There’s nobody using the pitch in the afternoons until Quidditch season. We can go down right after Defense and you can use Blaise’s broom while I show you some moves. How about it?”

Harry thought about it for a moment before nodding.

“Ok. After class then.” He said as they arrived at their destination.

“Quiet down now,” Lupin said, beginning the lecture. “Now, today we’ve got a very interesting lesson about a dark creature called a boggart. Who can tell me what a boggart does?”

When no hands were raised, he continued.

“Well, a boggart takes the form of whatever it is that we fear the most. For example, for someone that is afraid of spiders, a boggart might become a very large spider. Its form is different depending on the person facing it, and if that person changes places with someone else, the boggart’s form will also change. Although it may seem like merely an illusion, let me be clear: when a boggart assumes a new form, it is a real form. The giant spider is a real spider. If your boggart becomes a person, it will not have the actual personality of the real person, but it will have a real person’s body. It is also important to note that a boggart can only assume one form, so even if you are more afraid of two spiders than one, only one will appear. Remember, boggarts thrive on your fear. No matter what form your boggart may take, it’s only goal is to make you afraid, not to hurt you.” He paused for effect before continuing. “Luckily, an easy charm exists to banish a boggart, which I will teach you now.”

Lupin spent the next few minutes teaching the class the charm before having students come up one by one and demonstrate it. As Harry’s turn approached, he slid carefully to the back of the room and out of line. He wasn’t exactly sure what form his boggart would take, but he wasn’t going to risk it turning into his uncle and all the questions that scene would cause. Across the room, Parvati Patil frowned in confusion as she watched Harry Potter slide out of the boggart line and slink toward the back of the room. She resolved to talk to Lavender about it later.

Harry made it the rest of the lesson without having to face the boggart, and when no one questioned why he’d stepped out of line he felt satisfied that he hadn’t been noticed. Together with Blaise and

Tracey, he made his way back to the Slytherin dorms where the other two grabbed their brooms before walking out to the Quidditch pitch.

“Ok, it’s real easy,” Tracey began, mounting her broom slowly. She explained the basic positioning for broom riding, and Harry copied her on Blaise’s broom. She took him through basic hovering and movement before they did some slow turns, all of which Harry managed easily. Tracey took him up a little higher and went a little faster, and still Harry had no trouble keeping up. When they were about thirty feet in the air, Tracey suggested they head back down, but Harry had other ideas.

As he became accustomed to the feeling of flying, Harry began to feel the most incredible sensation he had ever experienced. With every foot he rose in the air, he felt like he was getting closer to something; something he’d been missing his entire life. He could almost feel the magic in the broom as Tracey took him through the exercises faster and faster. He felt like the broom itself was straining for more, and as they slowly increased their speed Harry found it harder and harder to keep from completely letting go. As Tracey began to float toward the ground, Harry unleashed the feeling inside of him and shot into the air with all the speed he could manage. He barely registered Tracey’s astonished shout before she was out of earshot and he was soaring through the air.

For a moment, Harry didn’t remember where he was. He felt like he was weightless, formless even. He felt like he was everywhere at once, and it took him a moment to realize that he was laughing. Not a small laugh, but a full-body, all-out, joy-filled laugh; the type of laugh that had never before come out of his mouth. As he slowly came back to his senses, he was amazed to realize that for the first time in his life, he felt free.

Free. Completely, 100, no strings attached free. He’d spent his entire life fighting to experience true freedom, and now he had it, and it felt incredible.

He could feel the magic in the broom singing along with him as he looped and rolled through the clouds. He threw himself into a steep dive before pulling out and rocketing straight upwards, unwrapping

his feet from under the broom as he did so. Carefully, he braced his right foot on the end of the broom and then let go with his left hand, spreading it out perpendicular from his body as he continued his vertical climb.

As he leveled out, Harry marveled at how truly liberated he felt. Up here he could do anything he wanted, anything at all. With another laugh, he let go of the broom with both his hands and stood up before he leaned back and fell off, free-falling through the clouds.

As he gained speed, Harry flipped over on his back and summoned the broom back to him wandlessly, grabbing it with his right hand before bracing his right foot on the end and pulling up from his death drop. With a grin, he went into another dive and pulled out at about 50 feet before floating gently down to where Blaise and Tracey were waiting.

“What did you think you were doing!” Tracey screeched when he had landed. “We couldn’t even see you half the time, you were too high! You could have killed yourself, Potter!” It took Harry a moment to recover from the feeling he’d just experienced, but gradually his face became guarded again and he shrugged at Tracey before looking at a smirking Blaise.

“I guess you like flying after all, eh Potter?” He asked.

“You could say that,” Harry replied.

“You scared me to death!” Tracey huffed.

“I’m sorry if I scared you,” Harry said earnestly. “I didn’t mean to. And I’m glad you helped me out, I really appreciate it.”

“Oh, well. You’re welcome,” said Tracey, blushing slightly.

“So Potter,” said Blaise as he stepped in front of Tracey. “Was that really your first time a broom?” Harry nodded. “Well, you might want to get your own then. I’d suggest a Nimbus, if you can afford it.”

“Is that the best broom on the market?”

“Actually, that would be the Firebolt, but they’re so expensive I don’t think anybody actually has one. Shall we head back in?”

“Hang on, let me get my broom,” Tracey said.

“Why didn’t she just summon it?” Harry asked as they waited for Tracey.

“Anti-summoning ward,” Blaise replied succinctly. “A lot of people have them put on their personal brooms, otherwise someone could summon it out from underneath you.” He didn’t notice Harry’s face pale dramatically as he said this.

The two waited for Tracey to return before walking together back into the castle and down toward the dungeons.

“Why don’t you play some exploding snap with us, Potter?” Tracey asked as they entered the Slytherin common room.

“Sorry,” Harry said, shaking his head. “I’m on my way to the library, but thanks for the offer. And you can call me Harry, you know.” He said.

“Next time then, Harry,” said Tracey, giving him a small smile. Harry grunted noncommittally and left the two friends, walking up to his room to grab his books before heading to the library.

Malfoy and the other boys that had been bitten returned to class late Friday afternoon, and as expected, spent the majority of their time glaring daggers at Harry. According to Tracey, Draco had been overheard saying that his father was already working on getting Harry expelled, but he had simply shrugged it off and resolved to deal with it when the time came. After all, he seriously doubted that Dumbledore would allow Lucius Malfoy to expel him.

Harry awoke the next morning realizing that the week was finally over and Saturday had arrived, and with it the first of the “detentions” he had agreed to serve, this one with Professor McGonagall. It was agreed that he would spend three hours with her and some select

Gryffindors that afternoon, but as he walked toward McGonagall's office he couldn't help feeling suspicious that he was being set up. When he reached the correct door, he knocked and waited for it to open before entering.

"Hello Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall greeted as he entered. "How are you today?"

"I'm fine, Professor McGonagall. Thank you for asking," Harry replied politely.

"Well then," McGonagall said, getting up from her desk. Harry could tell she was slightly wary of him, but was doing her best to hide it. "At the headmaster's suggestion, I've assembled a small group of my students and I thought it would be nice if we could all get to know each other better. If you'll follow me."

Harry nodded and followed McGonagall out of her office and down the hall to an empty classroom that had been fitted with two long couches arranged facing each other with a single chair between them at the far end. Crammed onto one of the couches were three boys, two of which had red hair, while Hermione sat on the other couch. Harry took a seat next to Hermione while McGonagall sat in the head chair.

McGonagall went around the room and introduced everyone, even Ron Weasley and Hermione, who Harry already knew. The other redhead turned out to be Ron's brother Percy, who Harry had heard about since he was head boy. The third boy, who was slightly pudgy and had short, brown hair, was introduced as Neville Longbottom. Harry shook both their hands politely before retaking his seat next to Hermione.

At McGonagall's insistence, they went around the room and said a little bit about themselves. The conversation was a bit forced, but no one wanted to upset McGonagall, so they made do. After about 45 minutes, McGonagall was satisfied that they weren't going to kill each other and decided to leave them alone for the remainder of the time. As soon as she had left the room, Ron Weasley began casting quick

glances at the door, as if he were waiting for something. Frowning, he turned back to the group.

"Hey Potter, is it true that you're a parselmouth?" He asked loudly. Percy and Neville gasped but Hermione just rolled her eyes.

--Of course-- Harry hissed at him. "That means yes," he said in English, rolling his eyes as Neville squeaked and Ron recoiled.

"N-Now see here, Potter," Percy began pompously.

"What?" Harry cut him off. "It's just a language, it can't hurt you."

"That's not what I heard," Ron said accusingly. "I heard you tried to kill Malfoy with it so you could take his place."

"I didn't try to kill anyone," Harry said, slightly annoyed. He knew this was exactly why the headmaster had schedule these meetings, but he didn't have to like it. "Malfoy and his friends attacked me and I fought back. One of the things I used to fight back were snakes, which I commanded in parseltongue. But I didn't try to kill anyone, and I certainly don't want anything of Malfoy's." He finished firmly.

Neville looked like he wanted to ask something, but couldn't manage to get the words out. As he closed his mouth for the third time, the door opened to reveal the Weasley twins followed by three more boys and two girls. Immediately on his guard, Harry stood up smoothly and edged his way next to the head chair.

"I didn't know our time was up already," he said carefully to the new group.

"That would be because it isn't!" Fred said jovially.

"Not even close!" George added.

"But we couldn't let these four have all the fun."

"Not with such a distinguished guest."

"A sad day, Fred."

"Indeed George."

"When we aren't invited to meet the new prince of Slytherin!" They said together.

"You know I really don't like that nickname," Harry said casually, now standing next to the head chair. "It's not accurate at all; just because I took Malfoy down a peg doesn't mean I want to take his spot."

"What's this Fred," George gasped.

"A Slytherin with no ambition?" Fred replied with a mocking incredulous expression.

"That's enough, you two," Hermione broke in. "Harry is here to meet with us like Professor McGonagall asked. He doesn't need you bothering him."

"The know-it-all strikes again," said Lavender sarcastically. "You'd better listen to her, she does know everything, after all." Parvati giggled.

"Whose side are you on, anyway?" Ron asked suspiciously. "This is the second time I've seen you defending him." He jerked his thumb at Harry.

"Maybe she has a crush on him," Parvati said, still giggling.

"Like he'd ever go for a buck toothed train wreck like her," Lavender said, and Parvati's giggle became a full blown laugh. Hermione looked like she wanted to disappear as her eyes filled with tears. She got up to leave but stopped when she felt Harry's hand on her shoulder.

"You think I'd rather have a fat cow like you?" he said coldly. "Or maybe a brain-dead bimbo like your friend?" Harry snorted in disdain.

"Oi! You can't talk to her like that!" Seamus yelled.

"I'll talk to her how I please," Harry snapped, his eyes narrowing dangerously. "Nobody insults my friends, so apologize or get out."

Seamus started to respond but stopped when Fred spoke first.

"I believe the Slytherin prince has made his appearance."

"I believe you're right, o brother mine."

"Shall we get on with it then?" Fred asked.

Harry pulled his wand and formulated his attack plan as he edged backwards for some cover.

"Indeed we shall." George answered.

"Alohamora!" They intoned together, pointing their wands at the wardrobe in the back of the room behind and to the left of Harry.

For a moment, Harry was confused. He kept his eyes forward, thinking it was a trick to make him turn around. Then he heard a voice that made his blood freeze.

"You can't kill me, boy..." His uncle's voice hissed. Shocked, Harry whirled around and pointed his wand at the wardrobe, preparing to obliterate it, when his uncle laughed and a body came flying out to land in front of Harry. All thoughts of his uncle or the other people in the room vanished when he saw who it was.

"ROW!" He screamed frantically, falling to his knees beside his badly beaten sister.

Her face was covered in blood from gashes all over her cheeks and forehead, and it looked like her left eye had been punctured. Her clothes were bloody and torn, and it was obvious that she had been severely beaten and whipped, as her flesh hung in bloody strips from her chest and abdomen. There were vicious gashes running down the veins in both of her arms, and her legs were bent and twisted at impossible angles.

“H-Ha-ar-ry,” she gasped out. “W-Wh-Why?”

Tears were running down Harry’s face unchecked as he held his dying sister.

“HANG ON!” He yelled through his tears, trying frantically to apply the one healing charm that he knew to her numerous wounds. No matter how hard he tried, it just wasn’t enough.

“DON’T DIE! DON’T DIE!” He screamed. Desperately, Harry focused all the magic at his disposal, he knew he had a healing power and he would make it work for her. His magic flared and he felt the power flowing around him, but still he couldn’t heal his sister’s injuries. With a scream of frustration, he pushed harder and harder until he could almost feel Row’s wounds.

As Harry started to lose himself in his magic, he was hit with a burst of sudden inspiration. He refocused his healing magic and tried to transfer the wounds to himself rather than heal them. Placing his hands over Row’s face, he screamed in agony as his face erupted in hideous gash marks and his left eye was punctured. He was about to lose his hold when he remembered what was at stake, so instead he focused all his will on blocking the pain and healing his newly acquired wounds. It was exhausting, but Harry began to slowly make progress on Row’s battered body, transferring the wounds to his own body and then healing them. The rest of the students in the room could only watch, horrified, as vicious gashes, bruises, and stab wounds erupted on Harry’s body, sending blood gushing onto the floor. Hermione and George Weasley both tried to approach the two, but were thrown back violently by an unseen force. After almost ten minutes, Harry’s clothes were soaked in his own blood and he could tell he was tiring. He had not heard Professor McGonagall enter, but he vaguely registered that she was shouting at him to stop. Of course he wouldn’t, not when he was so close and Row was still breathing.

With a final effort, he extended his magic once more and felt something puncture his stomach as his legs snapped several times. He focused his healing energy one last time, but found that he just

didn't have the strength to do it. He managed one last look at Row before he collapsed and fell into the warm embrace of darkness.

When Albus Dumbledore returned to Hogwarts later that same night, he was already in a very bad mood.

He had spent much of his afternoon waiting at the flat Harry Potter shared with Jack Thomas, hoping to hear the older boy's perspective on his adopted brother. He had tried off and on for the better part of three hours, but was unable locate the boy, and therefore moved on to his second stop.

Through various sources, Dumbledore had learned that some time after Petunia Dursley had filed for Harry's emancipation, she had taken her son and moved away from Privet Drive, finally settling in a quiet neighborhood in Hertford. Even more unsettling was the fact that her husband, Vernon, had apparently left her prior to the move, and was now nowhere to be found.

His meeting with Petunia Dursley had been a cornucopia of bad news. After quietly confounding both her and her overweight son, he immediately began to use his legilimency, asking his questions carefully to bring up the desired memories. It was with no small amount of alarm that he had realized that someone had put a mental block on her, and promptly removed it. He was not at all prepared for what it revealed.

As soon as he'd removed the block, Petunia had begun shrieking incoherently to the point that he was forced to sedate her using a very strong calming charm. As he began to view the memories of Harry's ritual destruction of the Dursley family, he felt his blood run cold.

When he had finished watching, he shook his head in disbelief. The similarities between Harry Potter and Tom Riddle that he had hoped to disprove had instead been strengthened tenfold. As he sat with a heavily sedated Petunia Dursley, he decided that he needed to see, in detail, exactly how badly Harry been treated in his childhood.

Although he knew what he was about to see would not be pretty, he was still unprepared for what he saw.

Even though Petunia had only partial memories of Vernon Dursley actually beating Harry, Dumbledore was absolutely floored at the sheer number of times it had happened. In fact, it seemed as if the boy had not gone a day in his young life without some sort of physical mistreatment from his relatives, and that was not including the tiny cupboard they locked him in for days at a time. The headmaster had known it was bad, obviously, but this was absolutely inhuman. It was a wonder the boy could function at all! His mind spinning, he withdrew from Petunia Dursley's memories and stunned her before taking a seat.

Not for the first time, Albus Dumbledore cursed the day he had first heard the name Dursley and felt a wave of despair wash over him as a single tear ran unchecked into his beard. He could not allow Harry Potter to follow the same path as Tom Riddle, no matter how brutal he had been treated. Dumbledore knew he had to find some way to bring the boy to the light, or Harry Potter would slip away from him too, and he would not allow that to happen. Albus Dumbledore was many things, but a coward was not one of them. He currently had possibly the most powerful 13 year old wizard in history in his school under his care, and he would see that power used for good if it was the last thing he did. The wandless magic he had witnessed in Petunia's memory was even more advanced than he had imagined, and he could only dream of what the boy was capable of now, after years of practice and study. As he stood and apparated back to Hogsmede, the headmaster walked with a renewed determination to banish the malevolent hatred that threatened to consume Harry Potter, no matter the cost. Having Harry branch out to other houses was already a first step, and Dumbledore was anxious to see the results of the boy's day with Minerva and the Gryffindors.

He was therefore rather dismayed to learn that not only had the meeting not gone well, but Harry Potter was currently a resident of the hospital wing in a magical coma that Madame Promfrey was at a loss to explain.

“Perhaps it would be best to start at the beginning, Minerva,” Dumbledore addressed his deputy Headmistress when they were seated in his office.

“Well, as I said, I escorted Mr. Potter to a classroom I had set up for the occasion. I asked Ronald and Percy Weasley as well as Neville Longbottom and Hermione Granger to join us, and stayed for an hour before leaving the group by themselves. Now, as I understand it, the third year Defense Against the Dark Arts class recently deal with boggarts. During that class Mr. Potter avoided confronting the creature, and Parvati Patil, a fellow third year, noticed. When it became known that Ronald Weasley was to join the meeting with Harry Potter, he took it upon himself to inform his twin brothers, who decided to use that information to their advantage. The Weasley twins were able to sneak the boggart from the Defense classroom to the room I had prepared for our meeting, and set it up in a wardrobe at the back of the room. Shortly after I left, they entered along with Lee Jordan and the rest of the Gryffindor third year students and managed to set the boggart upon Mr. Potter.”

Dumbledore sat up alertly in his seat. This was information he could definitely use if he was to better understand the boy.

“And what was Mr. Potter’s boggart?”

McGonagall appeared visibly shaken as she replied.

“It was Miss Thomas,” she said slowly. “Or rather, it was a mutilated and dying Miss Thomas. According to Miss Granger, it appeared that she had been tortured mercilessly and was barely hanging on to consciousness.”

“Tortured by whom, I wonder,” Dumbledore wondered aloud, but almost immediately the answer came to him. “Was there anything else, Minerva? Anything odd?”

“Actually, there was,” McGonagall replied. “Miss Granger also mentioned a voice before the body came out of the wardrobe. She said it was a man’s voice, but the only word she could make out was ‘boy.’”

That was all the confirmation Dumbledore needed. So, Harry Potter's worst fear was that his sister would be subjected to the same torture that he had been. It was the first good news that Dumbledore had gotten all day.

"Please continue."

"Well, after that Mr. Potter was understandably upset, to the point of being hysterical. He started trying to cast healing charms, but they were of course ineffective, and according to Miss Granger he appeared to be getting desperate when he suddenly seized up and started shaking. Shortly after that, the wounds on the boggart began to disappear and the same wounds began to open on Mr. Potter. At this point, Mr. Longbottom had come to me and I entered the room." She paused to compose herself. "I have never seen so much blood, Albus. It was everywhere, and Mr. Potter was clearly killing himself, but refused to let go."

"Did you try to approach him?"

"I did, but he was emitting some sort of ward around himself and the boggart; I couldn't get through."

"I assume that eventually he collapsed from simple exhaustion, then?"

"Precisely," McGonagall nodded. "He has been with Poppy for several hours now but shows no signs of waking."

Dumbledore sighed heavily.

"Then it appears that all we can do is wait."

It was nearly three whole weeks later on October 1st that Harry finally awoke. It took a moment for him to realize where he was and why he was there, but it all came back to him when his eyes landed on the chair next to his bed where Row sat reading.

“ROW!” He yelled, jumping out of bed and engulfing his sister in a frantic hug. “You’re alive? Are you ok?” He said, pulling back to look her over.

“You’re awake!” Row exclaimed, and this time it was Harry who was engulfed in a hug. “I was so worried!”

“You were worried?” Harry asked, confused. Wha-”

“Sit down, and I’ll explain everything.”

For the next few minutes, Harry listed while Row explained about the boggart and how Harry had miraculously healed it at great cost to himself. When she was almost finished, Madame Promfrey came in.

“Well, I see you are finally awake, Mr. Potter,” she said crisply.

“How long have I been out?” Harry asked, shaking his head.

“Almost three weeks,” the matron replied as she began to run some tests. At Harry’s shocked look, she huffed. “You’re lucky to have woken up at all. I don’t know what you did, but I have never had a patient with such a case of both physical and magical trauma.” She finished running her wand around Harry. “How do you feel?”

“I feel fine,” Harry said slowly. “Can I leave?”

“Certainly not!” Madame Promfrey exclaimed. “I’ll need to make you have healed properly and help you regain your strength.” She fixed Harry with a stern glare. “I do not believe that you fully understand what happened to you, Mr. Potter. The boggart form that you attempted to heal was damaged beyond possible repair. In fact, had it been a real person, they would have been dead before you ever saw them. When you were brought here, not only were you in shock from extreme blood loss, but your magic was fundamentally damaged. In fact, for a moment I thought you would end up a squib.”

“Is that why it took so long for me to recover?”

“Partially,” the matron replied, handing him a potion. “The trauma experienced by your body and your magic was too severe to heal normally, and, simply put, you shut down.”

“When can I leave?”

“As soon as I am satisfied that there is no lasting damage, you can go. Not before.”

Harry frowned but realized that there really wasn't anything he could do, so he just shrugged and nodded. Madame Promfrey gave him another potion and went back to her office, leaving him alone with Row.

“Three weeks, huh?”

“I've been really worried, Harry,” Row said, sniffing. “When Hermione told me what happened, I came straight here, but they wouldn't even let me see you. It took a few days, but finally Dumbledore came and told me that you were in a coma, but that I could visit you whenever I wanted. I've spent all my free time in this chair for the last three weeks.” She started crying. “I'm just so glad you're awake!”

“Come here,” Harry said, wrapping an arm around her. “I'm glad you were here too, otherwise I might have gone a little crazy trying to find out if you were ok.” He paused before continuing quietly. “It looked so real, I thought it was you. I couldn't even think, I just knew I had to heal you before you died.” He shuddered.

“How did you do that, anyway,” Row said, drying her eyes. “Hermione said that it looked like you were taking the wounds from the boggart and transferring them to yourself.”

“I don't know how I did it, really,” Harry replied honestly. “I wasn't really thinking about it, I just knew I had to do something, and I had to make it work. I don't even know if I could do it again.”

“You'd better not!” Row said seriously. “Dumbledore told me that whatever you did almost destroyed your magic; like you were doing

something that shouldn't be done. For God's sake, it left you a coma for three weeks, Harry!"

"It felt like a only few moments to me," Harry answered absently. "Speaking of which, what have I missed around here?"

Row glared at him for changing the subject, but grudgingly filled him in on what he'd missed in the last three weeks, which wasn't much. Thanks to Hermione, the rumors about why he was in a coma had been crushed as soon as they started, since she had insisted on making sure everyone knew the truth. Harry made a mental note to thank her later.

Of course, that also meant that there wasn't a person in the castle who didn't know about the relationship between Row and Harry.

"How's that going?" Harry asked when she told him.

"It's not too bad," Row replied, shrugging. "It's mostly the same questions over and over again; it didn't even make the paper, which I'm sure you're happy about." Suddenly she remembered something and her face fell. "There was something in the paper though, and it's not good. Lucius Malfoy was pressing for your expulsion after the incident with Draco, so the Board of Governors appointed someone to look into what happened, a guy named Amos Diggory, his son goes here actually. Anyway, he basically came in, asked some questions, and said everything was fine. We were all happy, of course, but Lucius Malfoy was furious, and he went to the press. They ran stories for a week about how you're going to be the next Dark Lord since you're violent and can speak parseltongue. Then they started talking about how Dumbledore was senile and putting students in danger, and how Lucius Malfoy was trying to clean the school up, but Dumbledore kept stopping him. It was pretty bad, and they said some really mean things about you, Harry."

"Are people still talking about it?"

"Not really, the articles stopped when they realized you might not wake up, and they couldn't get you to comment," she looked at Harry apologetically. "I gave an interview once, but they twisted everything I

said, so I didn't give another one. Once the articles stopped, people stopped talking about it, around here at least. Still, I don't know what it will be like the next time you go to Diagon Alley."

"I guess we'll find out then," Harry said with a sigh. "Anything else?"

"Not really, besides that everything has been pretty normal. Sarah mentioned something strange happening with the older Slytherins, but I haven't noticed anything."

"I'm sure I'll find out soon enough," Harry replied darkly.

"Oh, there is one other thing," Row said suddenly. "Dumbledore comes to see you every few days, and he asked me if I could get in touch with Jack for him."

Harry stiffened.

"What for?"

"I'm not sure, he just said he wanted to talk to him about something. I told him it would best if he waited for you to wake up, and I warned Jack on the messenger."

"Good thinking," Harry complimented. "Whatever he wants, it can't be good."

"My thoughts exactly."

The two sat in silence for a moment before the doors to the hospital wing opened and Albus Dumbledore entered.

"Ah, Mr. Potter," he said, making his way over to Harry's bed. "You gave us quite a scare. I trust you are feeling better?"

"Much better, sir, thank you," Harry replied politely. He couldn't put his finger on it, but the headmaster sounded...different, somehow. More wary and less carefree.

“Good, good,” Dumbledore replied as he conjured a chair and took a seat. “You should know that I have spoken with all your teachers, and they have provided me with the work you have missed.” He flicked his wand and the table next to the bed was suddenly overflowing with parchment. “You will not be expected to turn the work in immediately, of course.”

“Thank you sir,” Harry replied, glancing over the pile of papers. “It will give me something to do while I wait for Madame Pomfrey to release me.”

“That it will, my boy,” said Dumbledore, twinkling slightly. “Now, I must ask if you remember what happened before you were brought here.”

“I remember, sir,” Harry said carefully. “Row already told me that it was a boggart, but I really thought it was her, and I just kind of went crazy. I don’t remember what I did, all I remember is thinking that I had to heal her somehow, and healing charms weren’t helping.”

Dumbledore nodded sagely. “Yes, Miss Granger informed me that you appeared to be acting on pure instinct, and I can only surmise that you were able to somehow harness a powerful blast of accidental magic and apply it to the boggart.” Harry nodded along like this made sense. “The parties involved have been punished for disrupting your meeting, and for a potentially dangerous prank. I know the experience was traumatic for you, Harry, but it was not meant as such. Messrs Fred and George Weasley have a rather colorful reputation for their student pranks, and are both quick to admit that this one got away from them. They have both asked that they be allowed to see you and apologize.”

Harry considered that for a moment.

“I’ll see them” he replied shortly. “Although I fail to see how exposing someone to their worst fear is funny.” He shot a look at Row before looking back at the headmaster. “Now, what is this I hear about you wanting to talk to Jack?”

Dumbledore's gaze flickered to Row for a moment before he answered.

"I would like to speak to Mr. Thomas regarding your living arrangements over the holidays," he replied slowly. "As Mr. Thomas is technically a squib, I thought he might benefit from interacting with other squibs who function in both the muggle and magical worlds. I have also received an invitation from the Weasley family asking if Miss Thomas and her family would care to spend some of their Christmas at the Weasley house. Since he is your guardian, I thought it best to ask Mr. Thomas directly if either of these offers were of interest to him."

Harry was startled by Dumbledore's response, and it took him a moment to realize exactly what had just been proposed.

"The same Weasleys that put me in here?" He asked incredulously. He turned to Row. "Did anyone mention this to you?"

Row frowned. "Ginny said something about it, but I wasn't sure if she was serious or not," she replied.

"It is your decision, of course," Dumbledore broke in smoothly. "I only thought that as your brother, Mr. Thomas might like to know that he has more options than simply living his life as a muggle."

Harry considered Dumbledore's proposal for a moment, looking for any potential dangers. What the headmaster said made sense, but he didn't want to leave Jack alone with him.

"It sounds like a good idea, but Jack might not be comfortable around another wizard by himself," Harry answered carefully. "Row and I will owl him about it, and see if we can work something out. Maybe we could all meet sometime soon?"

Dumbledore was silent for a moment before he smiled.

"Splendid," he said, getting up from his chair and vanishing it. "Well, I don't believe Poppy will need to keep you here for more than a few days, so I will tell your professors to expect you back soon. Good

day.” He nodded to both Harry and Row before turning and leaving the hospital wing.

“What’d you think?” Row asked when he had gone.

“It makes sense,” Harry answered slowly. “But something’s not right.”

“He seemed sincere to me,” Row offered.

“I know he sounded sincere, but,” Harry trailed off. “I don’t know, maybe I’m just being paranoid. Either way, we should talk to Jack tonight.”

“Ok. I’ve gotta get to class,” she said, giving Harry another hug. “Feel better.”

“I will,” Harry said as he released her. Row turned and walked out of the hospital wing and Harry turned to the mound of parchment next to him and started to work through it.

Harry spent the next two days working on the homework he’d missed. Row came by again along with Hermione, Padma, and Sarah, all of whom were glad he was awake and wished him a speedy recovery. Professor McGonagall also came by with the Weasley twins, both of whom apologized contritely for letting things get out of hand. Although he was more than a little annoyed that their stunt had landed him in the hospital for for the better part of a month, Harry knew that getting angry wouldn’t do any good. Instead, he asked them what he’d ever done to them that they felt the need to attack him, at which point both twins had looked at each other miserably and apologized again, assuring him that they didn’t mean it like that and it wouldn’t happen again. When they had gone, McGonagall remained behind.

“Mr. Potter, I feel I especially owe you an apology for leaving you in such a situation,” Harry started to object but McGonagall stopped him. “You were my responsibility for the afternoon and I allowed you to be put in a situation that could have killed you. I assure you, Mr. Potter, I will not let it happen again.” The old woman finished her statement so fiercely that Harry found his respect for her increasing.

“That you Professor, I know you wouldn’t have left if you knew what was going to happen,” Harry said. “But I accept your apology anyway.” McGonagall face softened slightly and she gave him a curt nod as she left.

Harry was finally discharged from the hospital wing two days later, despite the fact that he felt exactly the same as he did when he’d woken up. Since it was Sunday, there were groups of students milling around all over the castle as he walked toward the dungeons, some of whom pointed and whispered as he walked by.

As he was nearing the end of a hallway, he heard laughter coming from an adjacent corridor ahead of him.

“Morsus,” he heard a boy’s voice intone the stinging hex, followed by a yelp of pain.

“Stop it!” A much younger girl’s voice said. “Just leave him alone!”

“Morsus,” an older girl snapped. “Don’t talk mudblood.”

Scowling, Harry drew his wand and quickened his pace around the corner in time to see two Hufflepuff first years cowering against the wall in front of his housemates Thomas Montague, Miles Bletchley, Theodore Nott, Daphne Greengrass, and Millicent Bulstrode. Bulstrode and Bletchley were standing over the smaller children with their wands drawn, laughing cruelly.

Harry snarled and unleashed a concussion hex into the middle of the Slytherin group, simultaneously summoning the two small Hufflepuffs out of the way. The blast sent Bletchley and Bulstrode face first into the wall, which they hit with a sickening crunch before sliding to the floor. Montague, Nott, and Greengrass were thrown away from each other at odd angles, but none were seriously injured.

A quick summoning charm brought Bulstrode and Bletchley’s wands to his hand before Harry stuck them both to wall spread eagled. Catching movement from the corner of his eye, Harry turned in time to see Daphne Greengrass put her hand over Montague’s, stopping

him from drawing his wand. Harry watched them closely as he motioned for the two Hufflepuffs to stand in front of him.

"Are these the only two that attacked you?" He asked quietly, his eyes never leaving his other housemates.

"Y-yes, sir," the girl stammered. "Th-the others j-just stood there."

"And they only hit you with stinging hexes?" The little girl nodded.

"Fuck you Potter," Bulstrode spat. "The mudblood lovers put you in the hospital wing and you defend them? You're pathetic!"

"Morsus," Harry said calmly, sending a stinging hex at Bulstrode's throat. She writhed and let out a choked scream.

"Not very fun, is it," he said coldly. "Morsus," this time it was Bletchley who choked as he was hit in the same spot as Bulstrode.

"You two better get back to your friends," Harry told the two Hufflepuffs, who immediately scampered away. "Now," he said, turning back to the bound students. "I've already said this once, and I'll say it again." His eyes narrowed dangerously. "I. Hate. Bullies." He bit out coldly. "Serpensortia," he flicked his wand and one of his cobras slowly emerged from it.

--Climb up to her face-- He hissed at the snake, who gradually began to worm its way up Millicent Bulstrode's large body.

"I let you off easy last time, Bulstrode," he continued evenly. "It looked like you were just trying to protect your friend instead of being part of the planned attack, so I let you go without being bitten. Was that a mistake?"

"N-No," the large girl stammered, eyes wide with fear. "I-I'm s-sorry."

"I'll bet you are." Harry paused before whipping his wand toward Greengrass and her group. "Try it and you're next, Montague," he barked. Montague, who was in the process of drawing his wand,

paled and moved his hand away. Turning back to his captives, Harry flicked his wand and levitated the snake over to Bletchley.

"Engorgio," he said as the snake tripled in size. Bletchley whimpered.

"I don't think you were there, Bletchley, so take this advice," he paused. "Look at me!" He snapped, and Bletchley's eyes snapped open fearfully. "Picking on first years doesn't make you a man. In fact, it makes you pathetic, and even worse, it makes me angry." He hissed something under his breath and Bletchley whimpered again. "If I catch either of you again, I will hurt you."

--Thank you my friend, I believe they are scared enough-- He hissed at the cobra before banishing it. He petrified Bletchley and Bulstrode before removing the binding charm and throwing their wands on top of them.

"For someone who hates bullies, you sure seem to enjoy bullying your housemates," Daphne Greengrass said loudly. "Maybe you just don't like anybody hogging your action?"

"Don't try this shit again," Harry said, ignoring the snide comment. With that, he turned and continued back down the Slytherin common room.

When he arrived, he noticed Blaise and Tracey seated in a corner together and made his way over to them.

"Well, well," Blaise said when he saw him. "Look who decided to wake up."

"Hi Harry," Tracey said shyly. "We're glad you're ok."

"Not everyone is," Harry muttered. "I need to ask you guys something: did anything happen while I was out?"

"Well, you missed Quidditch tryouts," Tracey began.

"No, I mean anything with Malfoy or his friends," Harry interrupted quietly.

“Oh. Well, he got a little more bold once you were gone for a while,” Tracey answered. “But nothing big. Why?”

“I just ran into Bletchley, Bulstrode, Greengrass, Nott, and Montague in the hall. They were picking on some Hufflepuff first years and laughing about it.”

“That kind of thing happens all the time,” Blaise cut in dismissively. “Plus they didn’t know you were out of the hospital.” He smirked. “I’m guessing that they know now?”

“What did you do?” Tracey asked.

“I told them not to do it again,” Harry said vaguely. “It was only Bletchley and Bulstrode anyway, really. Still...” He trailed off.

“You should watch yourself, Potter,” Blaise said. “Too many enemies isn’t good, even for you, and if you think the other houses are going to thank you for helping them, forget it. Didn’t the Gryffindors just put you in the hospital wing?” He snorted and Harry shrugged.

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Why don’t you study with us, Harry?” Tracey cut in, shooting Blaise a dirty look. “We can help you get caught up.”

“Ok,” Harry agreed, and went to get his supplies, completely missing the scowl on Blaise’s face.

Between the work he’d missed, the work newly assigned, and his own independent study, Harry found the rest of October flying by, and before he knew it Halloween was upon him, and with it his first scheduled visit to the village of Hogsmede.

Since his first detention had ended in disaster, it was decided that the rest of his detentions would be served with a teacher present, at least for the first few meetings. He had his second meeting with Professor

Sprout and the Hufflepuffs, but was surprised to find that Professor Sprout was barely civil to him, and her students were no better. In fact, the only student that didn't seem to hate him on sight was Cedric Diggory, who had settled for merely eyeing him suspiciously. Although the meeting had been scheduled for three hours, the conversation was so stiff and forced that Professor Sprout dismissed him after only an hour, claiming that the whole thing was "a waste of effort for someone like him." He had been about to ask what she meant when he had been promptly escorted out.

Although he still spent much of his study time in the library with Row and her friends, he had also been spending an increasing amount of time with Tracey and Blaise. This had mostly been at Tracey's insistence, which was how he found himself currently sitting at a small table in the Three Broomsticks with her while they waited for Blaise to arrive.

"I can't believe you only bought a wand holster and some candy," she said to Harry, who shrugged.

"That's all I needed."

"The only purpose of money is to be spent," Tracey said wisely. "What you need is irrelevant."

"I doubt that's a very popular opinion, especially in our house. Most of the old family types seem to think money is only good for saving."

"Yeah, well," Tracey said, fidgeting slightly. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm not the perfect Slytherin."

Harry had noticed, of course, but figured it wasn't exactly polite to ask why.

"You get by all right," he said diplomatically. "I'm sure most students here fit into more than one house. The hat said I could have gone into Gryffindor, after all. Who knows, in a different world you could have been a Hufflepuff."

Tracey's eyes snapped up to him fearfully and Harry got a short vision of her telling the sorting hat that she refused to be in Hufflepuff.

"A pure-blood in Hufflepuff? You must be joking."

"Actually, I could see that," Harry said slowly. "It's obvious you're very loyal to Blaise."

For some reason, she blushed at that.

"Yeah, well, I've known him pretty much my whole life." She muttered. "Our parents were great friends at school, and our families have always been on good terms. If you'd been best friends with somebody since you were six, you'd be loyal too."

"Would it really be that bad for one of you to end up in Hufflepuff?"

"Worse," she replied seriously. "For a pure-blood, being sorted into Hufflepuff is basically the same as declaring yourself a blood traitor. I know people that have been disowned because of it."

"Sounds stupid to me," Harry said honestly. "Of course, I'm not a pure-blood."

Tracey opened her mouth to respond but stopped when there was a crash from a table behind them. Harry turned to see a group of 3rd and 4th year Gryffindors facing a group of Slytherins over a wrecked table.

"Slimy snakes are probably just too scared," Seamus Finnegan said loudly.

"Scared of wittle old us?" Another boy in Gryffindor robes said mockingly. "Is that why you had the game changed?"

"What are they talking about?" Harry whispered to Tracey.

"The Gryffindor Slytherin Quidditch match was supposed to be this Friday," Tracey replied quietly. "But they changed it to Gryffindor Hufflepuff for some reason. Nobody knows why."

Harry turned back to just in time to see Ron Weasley say something to Draco Malfoy, but he was too far away to hear it clearly.

"It's undignified for us to play such a poor excuse for a team, Weasley," Malfoy said, smirking. The Slytherins laughed as Ron flushed.

"Well at least I don't get beaten up in my own common room!" Ron replied scathingly. "Everybody knows you're a joke now that Potter took your crown!"

Harry, who was watching the two groups warily, was too far away to hear exactly what Ron said, but judging from all the looks that were shot in his direction, he figured it was safe to assume it involved him.

Malfoy cast Harry a quick glance and started to look panicked. It was obvious he couldn't let Ron's comment go, but at the same time he really didn't want to bring Harry into the conversation.

He was saved by Daphne Greengrass, who had been watching the exchange when an idea hit her.

"What would you know about it, Weasley?" She said mockingly. "He and his sister told everyone how you basically ran away crying when you saw him, and had to call your brothers for protection. You're probably scared of him even now." She finished with a smirk.

"That's right," Nott said, catching on. "He said you were too scared to talk when you heard he was a parselmouth. That's not very Gryffindor of you, now is it?" The rest of the Slytherins snickered.

"I'm not scared of any of you slimy bastards!" Ron yelled, glaring at Harry.

"I don't know what you guys are talking about over there," Harry called firmly. "But leave me out of it."

"See?" Malfoy sniggered. "Even Potter knows how worthless Weasleys are."

"You think you're so great, Potter?" Ron yelled. "You're the one who couldn't even handle a boggart! You were crying like a little girl!" He grinned viciously as the Gryffindors laughed.

"I said leave me out of this, Weasley," Harry repeated, his tone cold.

"Did you know that Row Thomas said Weasley was so scared he wet his pants?" Daphne whispered loudly to Nott. "I heard her and Granger talking about it." They both snickered loudly.

"THAT'S A LIE!" Ron yelled, flushing an ugly red. "Potter's the one who's scared, and that Thomas bint wasn't even there!"

That got Harry's attention.

"You'd better be referring to the Thomas behind you," Harry said coldly as he stood up. "Otherwise-"

"What is going on here?" Interrupted a voice from the doorway. Immediately, the two groups separated and waited as Professor McGonagall approached.

"Nothing Professor," Seamus Finnegan said immediately. "We were just leaving." The other Gryffindors nodded in agreement.

McGonagall eyed him suspiciously.

"If that's the case, shouldn't you begin moving, Mr. Finnegan?"

"Uh, right," Seamus said, grabbing Ron's arm. "Come on," he hissed.

Ron threw one more glare at Harry, who looked back through narrowed eyes. As Ron passed by Daphne Greengrass, she whispered to Nott:

"Thomas was right, he's nothing but a coward."

Ron growled, but was pulled out the door before he could respond. Harry sat back down again to wait for Blaise, completely missing the satisfied smile Daphne Greengrass wore as she took her own seat.

Later that night was the Halloween feast, which was enjoyable except for the heated glares Harry could feel from the Gryffindor table. When the feast was over, Harry walked with the rest of the Slytherins down to the common room and sat down with Blaise and Tracey to study. About twenty minutes later, Professor Snape walked into the room and called a house meeting.

"There has been an incident," Snape began curtly. "It is possible that Sirius Black," he spat the name and shot a look at Harry. "Has found a way inside the castle, and the headmaster has requested that all students spend the night in the great hall. Bring only what you need, and do not get left behind. You have 5 minutes."

When the time was up, Professor Snape led the Slytherins back up to the great hall, which had been laid out with sleeping bags for each house. Harry saw that Row was talking with Hermione and made his way over to them.

"Do either of you know what happened?" He asked quietly.

"Sirius Black attacked the portrait that guards the Gryffindor common room," Hermione answered. "He ripped it up when he couldn't get through."

"They're searching the castle for him now," put in Row. "That's why we're all here."

"The Gryffindor common room?" Harry asked, slightly confused. It was common knowledge that he'd been sorted into Slytherin, so why had Black tried to get into Gryffindor?

Harry thought about this as he said good night to the girls and crawled into his sleeping bag, pretending to fall asleep immediately.

After about an hour of pretending, Harry was beginning to get frustrated. He'd planned on sneaking out once everybody was asleep, but it seemed that the teachers patrolling the area were taking great care to check on him quite often. Even if he managed to sneak out, his empty sleeping bag would be noticed almost immediately. Sighing in disappointment, he settled into his sleeping bag and allowed himself to drift off into a dreamless sleep.

A/N Whew, these chapters just keep getting longer. If this continues I think I'm going to have to start breaking them up.

Anyway, next chapter we get some Christmas drama, Patronus lessons start, and Harry gets to see his first Quidditch match. Thanks for reading!

The week after Halloween was frustrating for Harry, mainly because it seemed that he couldn't go anywhere without someone following him and monitoring his every move. Apparently, the fact that Sirius Black had been attempting to break into Gryffindor rather than Slytherin did little to discourage the assumption that he was after Harry; an assumption that irritated him to no end.

Another thing that was bothering him was the lack of hostility he felt from Malfoy and his cronies. He'd expected some sort of retaliation after the incident with Bletchley and Blustrode, but it hadn't come. Ironically, the exact opposite was true with the other houses in the school, as he'd noticed an increasing amount of Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs glaring at him every chance they got.

On Thursday, Harry had his overdue first Patronus lesson with Professor Lupin. He had spent the last few days re-reading the details of the charm and how to perform it, but for some reason he was still unable to make it work. He hoped the Professor could shed some light on why.

"So," Lupin said once Harry had told him the problem. "You think you're doing it right, but you can't get results?" Harry nodded. "If you don't mind me asking, what memory were you using?"

"The first time I rode a broom," Harry replied slowly.

"That is most likely part of the problem," Lupin said thoughtfully. "But first you have to understand that the Patronus Charm, unlikely most charms, is made more powerful by emotion rather than raw power. In this memory, you were very happy, correct?" Harry nodded. "Yes, that is part of it, but merely remembering being happy is not enough. In order for the charm to work, you have to feel happiness and use it to power the spell. Spells powered by emotion, such as the Patronus Charm, are among the most difficult to master because they require both normal focus and intense emotional concentration."

Harry considered this for a moment before frowning.

"How do I feel happiness in the presence of a dementor?"

“Ah, and there you see the real difficulty,” Lupin said wisely. “Harry, there are many witches and wizards who can cast a patronus, but there are very few who can do so in the presence of an actual dementor. The best that most of us can manage is a silver mist like the one I used on the train. Let me be clear: the mist will repel a dementor, but it is quite weak, and if confronted by too many, would most likely fail.”

“But a corporeal patronus wouldn’t?”

“Correct,” Lupin said, smiling. “Now, I thought it best to begin with no outside interference until you can manage at least a solid mist. At that point, I will ask the headmaster for his assistance in re-creating the effects of a real dementor.”

Harry nodded his agreement and followed Lupin’s instructions for the rest of the lesson. By the end, he was able to manage a fine silver mist, much to Lupin’s amazement.

“That is an incredible amount of progress for your first lesson, Harry,” he said when they were finished. Harry just shrugged and agreed to meet the same time the next week.

After thanking Lupin for his time, Harry started back down to the dorms. The Patronus Charm was the first spell he’d come across that required the caster to be feeling a specific emotion, and he wanted to know why he hadn’t discovered this particular branch of magic before. He resolved to set aside some of his own study time to find out why, and to increase his emotional control.

The next day was the first scheduled Quidditch match of the year between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, and although he didn’t really want to go, Harry somehow found himself sitting in the pouring rain next to Tracey and Blaise as the game began.

“Trust me, you’ll be glad you came,” Tracey told him when they were seated. “You enjoy flying way too much not to like Quidditch.”

As the game progressed, Harry had to admit it did look like fun. Tracey had filled him in on the general rules, and the only thing he

couldn't figure out was why the seekers refused to catch the snitch, which he'd spotted no less than 3 times already.

He was about to ask Tracey if this was part of their strategy when he started to feel the cold sensation he associated with approaching dementors. As he flipped his wand into his hand, Harry began to focus on feeling happy, but found that the dementors, which were now circling the pitch, were already too close for him to manage it. Gritting his teeth, he was struggling to stay lucid when a bright beam of energy lit up the pitch, causing the dementors to shriek as they fled. Harry followed the spell to its source, and was unsurprised to find Albus Dumbledore calmly casting the most powerful spell he had ever seen. He looked on in appreciation as the blinding white energy seemed to coalesce into the wings of a giant, ethereal bird, with streaks of energy streaking from it like a star. When it was clear that the dementors were gone, the bird soared into the sky and slowly dissipated into thin air.

After a few minutes of confusion, Madame Hooch regained control of the teams and the game began again, but Harry was no longer paying attention. Instead, he was thinking about the demonstration he had just witnessed from the headmaster, and wondering how long it would be before he could even attempt to repel so many dementors.

The fact that he had once again been unable to fight off the effects from the hideous creatures also weighed heavily on his mind, and though he had managed to remain in control of himself this time, the dementors had also been farther away, and it still hadn't been easy. Still, it was an improvement, and that was slightly encouraging. He could only hope that Lupin remained an effective teacher, and that eventually dementors would no longer present a problem.

The next night, Harry was in his usual spot in the library waiting for the rest of the group when Row entered looking furious.

"What's wrong?" He asked, immediately on his guard.

“Hermione just got hexed!” Row fumed. “And by her own housemates! She’s in the hospital wing right now.”

“Is she ok?” Harry asked as he got up and followed her out of the library.

“She’ll be fine eventually, but somebody hit her with the densaueo curse, and she had to go to Madame Promfrey to fix it.”

“Did she say why?”

“Something about an argument; she said she’ll tell us when you get there.”

The two walked quickly to the hospital wing and entered to find Sarah and Padma already there next to Hermione’s bed.

“Ok, we’re here,” Row said, still fuming. “Spill.”

“Ok,” Hermione said, taking a deep breath. “I was in the common room today and I heard Ron Weasley talking about you and how you were spreading rumors about him, Row. I told him that wasn’t true, that you’d never said anything about him at all, but then he called me a liar and starting making fun of me,” she paused for a moment to gather herself before continuing. “He said that I was already a traitor to my own house and that I was probably helping, since,” she stopped with an embarrassed cough.

“Well, since what?” Harry pressed.

“Since, well, I’m, uh, friends with you,” she said carefully, blushing. “I told him he didn’t know what he was talking about and he should get his facts straight, and he got really mad. I tried to pull my wand but he cursed me before I could.” She sniffed. “They started laughing when they saw what the curse did.”

The other three girls all moved to comfort Hermione looking murderous, but Harry looked thoughtful.

“What rumors are they talking about? Does anybody know?”

"I heard that Weasley is scared to death of you," Padma answered. "But I don't know if that's what he's talking about or not."

"I didn't start any rumors," Row said angrily.

"We know," Sarah said soothingly. "But obviously somebody did, and Weasley thinks it was you."

"He said something about that at the Three Broomsticks," Harry mused. "He made it a point to say that he wasn't afraid of me."

"They mentioned that too," Hermione put in, anxious to talk about something else. "Ron was arguing with his sister about the Slytherins attacking him at the Three Broomsticks, but I didn't know he meant you."

Harry frowned.

"I really don't get this," he said to no one in particular. "I've never done anything to him. If anything, I should be the one getting angry after what he and his brothers pulled with the boggart."

"He's positive that you and Row are the ones spreading rumors about him," Hermione replied. "I don't know why, maybe somebody is setting you up?"

"Like Malfoy," Row said instantly. "You know he wants to get you back for what you did to him."

"It's possible," Harry said slowly. "But what's in it for him? It's not likely Weasley is actually going to do something."

"You were just in the hospital wing for three weeks because of the Weasleys, Harry," Padma said slowly.

Harry was considering that when Madame Promfrey entered the room and shooed the visitors out, saying Hermione would be released in less than an hour. Row and the other girls decided to wait,

but Harry headed back to the library to resume his studying. He had a lot to think about.

As Harry was returning to the library, Albus Dumbledore was reading a letter he'd just received. Opening it, he saw the words:

Godric bless the first!

Intrigued at the use of such an old code, the headmaster summoned his penseive and examined a memory in it before casting a very specific charm on the parchment. Once he had, the words began to fade, leaving a short note.

Albus,

Sources reveal that Malfoy and Fudge are seeking a new 'proper' home for the Thomas girl away from the Potter boy. Her uncle has asked for the change, and because of her blood, you know this is possible. I am certain they are currently approaching potential families willing to take her in by the summer. The families are to be granted full guardianship rights, and the necessary rules invoked by the minister. All contact should adhere to the second of the old rules.

Dumbledore read the note twice more to be thorough before his eyes started to twinkle madly and he set the letter aside.

This was perfect! There was no doubt in his mind that Harry Potter would fight tooth and nail to prevent his sister from being taken away from him, which gave the headmaster a perfect opportunity to earn the boy's trust. If he played his cards right, he might even be able to place both Harry and his sister with a stable, light-sided family without having to apply any type of pressure himself. When he had his plan carefully diagrammed, the headmaster grabbed some floo powder and tossed it into the fireplace.

"Minister of Magic Private Office, Albus Dumbledore calling!" He said loudly, placing his wand in the fire followed by his head.

“Dumbledore!” Exclaimed Fudge when the old wizard’s face appeared in his office fire. “This is highly irregular! I was just about to head home.”

“Indeed, I apologize for the intrusion, but there is an urgent matter I need to speak with you about involving some students. I need your help, Cornelius, and I would trust no one else in the ministry with this situation.”

“Well then,” Fudge replied, puffing his chest out slightly. “What can I do for you?”

Satisfied that he had flattered the man enough, Dumbledore continued.

“It involves Mr. Harry Potter and Miss Rowena Thomas,” he began, ignoring the suddenly nervous look on the minister’s face. “It has come to my attention that they are both currently under the guardianship of a Mr. Jack Thomas, who is a squib, and only 16 years old. Both children are very important, as you know, and I cannot help but think it would be good for both of them to have a more stable family here in the wizarding world. However, since they are both emancipated in the muggle world, I would need your help.” He looked at the minister expectantly.

“I must say, Dumbledore, I’m quite glad to hear you say that, quite glad,” Fudge said as he leaned forward conspiratorially. “In fact, I’m already on top of the situation, and the matter should be settled very soon.”

“Indeed?” Dumbledore feigned surprise. “Well, that is good to hear! I’m sure you’ll find an excellent place for both of them.” Dumbledore shook his head wryly. “I cannot imagine what would happen if Mr. Potter were to be forcibly separated from his sister; the boy is quite protective. Have you found a family to take the two of them yet?”

“Two of them?” Fudge squeaked, wide eyed. He cleared his throat and took a drink of water before regaining his composure. “Well, I’ve only just begun to approach the families, you understand-” He blustered.

"Of course," Dumbledore replied kindly. "It is certainly not an easy job with children as important as them." He paused thoughtfully. "I may be able to provide some possibilities, if you would be interested?"

"Well, I guess it couldn't hurt," Fudge said arrogantly. "Who did you have in mind?"

"Amos and Pricilla Diggory would be a fine choice," Dumbledore replied thoughtfully. "You've met young Cedric, haven't you?"

"Diggory? Oh yes, a fine boy indeed. I considered them, of course. But with the busy times at the Ministry lately it's been simply impossible to find the time to approach Amos with the idea."

"Of course," Dumbledore replied amenably. "Would you prefer that I broach the subject to them? I am scheduled to meet them and Cedric quite soon anyway, if you'd prefer."

"Yes indeed," said Fudge pompously. "That would be a great help, Dumbledore."

"I could also speak to Arthur Weasley and Edward MacMillan, if it would help." Dumbledore said suggestively. "They have also shown themselves to be excellent parents of pure ancestry. Percy Weasley is the head boy this year, in fact."

Fudge seemed to consider that for a moment.

"Yes, I believe that will work out quite nicely." He said smugly.

"I am glad I could be of help," Dumbledore said, inclining his head slightly. "I shall let you know if I make any progress." With that, Dumbledore exited the fire and returned to his desk. Summoning a quill and parchment, he began to write a note to Amos Diggory.

The next day was Sunday, and Harry had his first detention with Professor Flitwick and the Ravenclaws.

Unlike his other detentions, the Ravenclaws seemed to take to him immediately, although it didn't hurt that three of the five people he met with already knew him rather well. In addition to Row, Sarah, and Padma, Harry was introduced to Anthony Goldstein and Terry Boot, both of whom appeared to be nervous, but relaxed once it became clear that Harry was not only quite intelligent, but also enjoyed talking about academics. The group enjoyed a lengthy discussion about the merits of Arithmancy, and both of the boys were quite impressed by the Slytherin's knowledge. After the meeting, Harry used the rest of the evening to practice his spell work in a nearby classroom.

The next morning Harry had Transfiguration with the Gryffindors, which gave him an idea. When no one was looking, he cast a quick severing charm at Ron Weasley's book bag, leaving the bottom wide open. When class was over, Ron, as expected, filled up the bag obviously and slung it over his shoulder, only to have all the books pour out all over the ground. As Ron scrambled to pick them up, Harry cast a quick silencing charm and waited patiently by the door as McGonagall and the rest of the class left.

Ron finally finished picking up his books and started to leave, shooting Harry a glare as he approached. His glare was quickly replaced with shock and then fear as Harry quickly disarmed him before throwing him roughly against the wall and hitting him with a foot-freezing curse, ensuring that he couldn't move either of his legs.

"What the-" Ron spat before he was abruptly silenced.

"Shut up and listen," Harry said coldly, standing over the frightened Gryffindor. "If you have a problem with me, you come to me, not to Hermione. If you want to curse someone, you curse me, or at least you can try." His eyes narrowed. "Now, we're going to get to the bottom of this, once and for all. Row didn't spread any rumors about you, and neither did I. Personally, I simply don't care about you that much, one way or the other. I want to know who you heard these things from, and now you're going to tell me." He removed the silencing charm and looked at Ron expectantly.

“Like I’m supposed to believe you?” Ron spat incredulously. “Everybody knows you lie about everything, snake boy. I’ll bet-” He was cut off as Harry silenced him again and sighed, exasperated. He had hoped to be able to discern the truth with legilimency, but thus far the only thing on Ron’s mind was how much he hated Harry. He decided to change tactics.

“Look, Weasley,” Harry snapped. “You don’t like me, which I really don’t care about, but what I do care about is that you were talking about my sister and you cursed one of my friends. So,” Harry grabbed Ron by the neck and slammed his head back into the wall. “You can either tell me, right now, where the fuck you heard these rumors, or I can start cursing you. It’s your choice.” He let him go and the redhead swayed forward before catching himself.

Ron struggled valiantly to move, but his legs were still frozen to the floor. He glared murderously at Harry, who entered his mind but again found nothing he could use.

“You want to know who told me?” Ron finally spat. “Everybody told me, so I know it’s true! Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, even the Hufflepuffs are saying it! How you think Gryffindors are cowards and I’m so afraid of you, well I’M NOT! I-”

“For the last time, Weasley, I never said any of that,” Harry ground out slowly, shaking his head in frustration. “Listen, I’ll make you a deal: you tell your housemates to stick around after Defense today, and I’ll tell everyone, in person, that I never said any of that. Then maybe you’ll actually get it through your thick skull that you are not that important.”

Ron still looked furious, but Harry could see he was at least considering the offer.

“Fine!” He finally spat. “But if you try anything-”

Harry just rolled his eyes and walked off, canceling the hex as he left.

When their Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson ended later that day, Harry stayed behind, as promised, and was unsurprised to see all of

the Gryffindor third years stay behind as well. He waited as Professor Lupin gathered up his papers and walked out into the hall, pausing slightly as the door when he saw who had remained behind. When he was finally gone, Harry cast a silencing charm and turned to the rest of the group. As he surveyed his audience, he didn't notice as the door opened slightly and a disillusioned Remus Lupin crept back in.

"Ok, we're here because there's a bunch of rumors going around about me that aren't true," Harry began firmly. "First of all, I've never said anything about Ron Weasley, or any other Gryffindor. I've never called any of you a coward, or said you're stupid, or anything like that, and neither did my sister, Row Thomas. Hermione," he gestured to the girl who was looking at the floor. "Has never said anything bad about any of you either, and she definitely didn't deserve to be hexed in her own common room by the people who are supposed to support her." A couple of them looked down at that.

"How are we supposed to believe you?" Lavender Brown asked loudly. "Everybody knows that you're the new Slytherin leader, so how do we know this isn't some sort of ploy?"

Harry fixed her with a hard stare and she shivered involuntarily.

"I am not the leader of Slytherin. In fact, most of them don't like me very much, but they stay out of my way because of what I did to Malfoy." His eyes narrowed. "And what I can do again. That goes for you, too. I could care less if you like me or not, but you leave my sister and Hermione out of it."

"You honestly expect us to believe that?" Pavarti asked incredulously. "We know what you've been doing to the other houses, why would we believe you over them?"

For the first time in a long time, Harry was absolutely speechless.

"What!" Was all he could manage to get out.

"Don't act like you don't know," Seamus said hotly. "I heard even Sprout knows what you're doing, but she can't prove it, otherwise she'd have you expelled."

"We know you're lying about everything," Lavender said matter of factly.

"And we know you get off on beating up first years!" Seamus sneered.

"Harry would never do that!" Hermione broke in heatedly.

"Shut up, beaver!" Seamus exclaimed as he shot a silencing charm at her.

Or at least he would have shot a silencing charm at her if he hadn't been knocked forward on his face from the concussion hex that Harry had thrown behind him. Lavender and Parvati went down with a scream, but Ron Weasley was only knocked off balance and was able to level his wand at Harry.

"Expelliarmus," he cried.

"Protego," Harry flicked his wand and deflected the curse back at Ron, hitting him in the chest and sending him flying backwards into a desk. Turning, Harry whipped his wand forward and leveled a stunner at Dean Thomas, who had just regained his feet. He was about to do the same to Seamus Finnegan when he saw his stunner impact on a hastily formed shield.

"ENOUGH!" Came Lupin's voice as he strode into the middle of the group. "I am very disappointed in all of you! Twenty points from every person who cast a spell, and another twenty from Miss Brown for insulting a housemate."

"But Professor," Lavender whined.

"That's enough," said Lupin, holding up his hand. "Mr. Potter obviously asked you all to be here so that he could clear the air, and you respond by throwing accusations at him and attacking Miss Granger." He looked at each of the students in turn. "I, for one, believe that he had nothing to do with these rumors, but you should each think about them yourselves, and form your own opinions, rather than simply taking someone else's word. Now, I trust there will

not be a repeat of this little incident?" Everyone except for Harry shook their head emphatically. "Very well, then I think we can forgo any detentions this once, you may go. Mr. Potter, if you could stay behind."

"Hermione too." Harry said.

"Very well, Miss Granger, you may stay as well."

Hermione smiled thankfully at Harry and took a seat while the rest of the Gryffindors filed out of the room.

"Now then, Harry," Lupin said when they had left. "That was a rather interesting display, if I do say so myself. Concussion hex?"

Inwardly chastising himself, Harry nodded.

"I told you I was a little ahead of the third year curriculum."

"That you did," Lupin replied with a nod. "So, I take it you're having some problems fitting in?"

Harry regarded Lupin carefully before extending a light legilimency probe. Finding nothing but honest concern, he shrugged and answered.

"It's not that bad, but somebody is spreading rumors, and everybody seems to believe the rumors more than me."

Lupin nodded sagely.

"Well, rumors usually die out after a little while," he said kindly. "It's best to just wait them out."

"I don't think that will work this time," Harry said, frowning. "I think someone is deliberately setting me up, but I don't know who. I guess it could be Malfoy, but it just doesn't seem like his style."

"I'm pretty sure it's not anybody in Gryffindor," Hermione said cautiously. "Most of the rumors involve the Gryffindors, after all."

"What about the stuff about other houses and Professor Sprout?" Harry asked her. "Have you heard anything about that?"

"No," Hermione shook her head. "But Lavender and Parvati always get gossip first, so it's very possible that it's a real rumor."

"I'd suggest talking to Professor Sprout, or maybe the headmaster," Lupin suggested. Harry scowled.

"Both unacceptable. Sprout made it very clear she wanted nothing to do with me, and Dumbledore would probably tell Snape."

"Wait a minute, Harry," Hermione said thoughtfully. "Maybe Sprout was acting strange because she already heard something about you and her students."

"If she was willing to believe a completely unsubstantiated rumor, what makes you think it'll do any good for me to talk to her now?" Harry asked quizzically. "No, she had her chance, and she'd probably just ignore me anyway."

"I wish you'd reconsider, Harry, but it's your decision." Lupin said kindly. "And remember, if you need to talk about anything, my door is always open." Harry just nodded and followed Hermione out into the hall.

"It's not fair how they treat you," she said quietly as they walked.

"Life is rarely fair," Harry replied. "They can't hurt me anyway; it's you and Row that I'm worried about." Hermione smiled slightly to herself as they continued walking.

Eventually they parted ways, and Harry made Hermione promise to tell him if they tried anything again. When he was satisfied, he made his way back to his dorm.

Harry spent the rest of the week splitting his time between studying his personal material and forming his plan to deal with the rumor situation. Despite his rather hectic life at Hogwarts, Harry was quite

happy with the progress he was making on his own. He was yet to successfully create a ward, but his Ancient Runes and Arithmancy classes had finally given him some of the skills he needed to decode the book he had, and he found himself at least able to begin the process. After McGonagall's instruction, he had really taken to Transfiguration, and was almost done with the fourth year curriculum using the more efficient method. He also devoted some of his time each day to simple meditation and focus, which he used to strengthen his mental defenses and improve his emotional control, which had helped him almost form a patronus in his latest lesson with Lupin. Of course the work he was typically assigned in class was far below what he was capable of, but he didn't mind. He was always careful not to show off just how easy everything was for him, and as a result he stayed almost completely out of the spotlight, which suited him just fine.

That Friday he had his second detention with McGonagall; something he had been looking forward to ever since the incident on Monday. The Gryffindors still glared at him every chance they got, and although Hermione hadn't been hexed again, he could tell that they were ridiculing her whenever they could.

He entered McGonagall's office to find her seated alone behind her desk grading papers. As he entered, he felt a strange sensation, almost like he was being watched, but the sensation quickly vanished and a brief survey found no one else in the room.

"Welcome, Mr. Potter," she said. "Please, take a seat." Harry sat in the chair facing the desk and looked at her expectantly.

"Now then, I thought perhaps it would be better for the two of us to spend some time together before bringing in the other students. I hope this meets with your approval?"

"Actually, it's perfect; there's something I need to discuss with you," Harry replied evenly.

"Oh?" McGonagall asked, surprised. "And what would that be?"

"It's about Hermione Granger," Harry said slowly. "And it's also about the ridiculous rumors that most of your students believe about me. Have you spoken to Professor Lupin about what happened after his class on Monday?"

"I have."

"Then you know that I tried to talk to Weasley and the others, but they wouldn't listen. The only person who believed me was Hermione, and Finnegan was about to curse her for it." Harry eyed McGonagall seriously. "I know they mistreat her, Professor. They make fun and laugh at her all the time, and she doesn't have a single friend in her own house. It's not right, and it can't continue."

"As much as I agree with you, Mr. Potter, there is very little I can do. I have already told my prefects about the situation, but I'm sorry to say that teasing is not against any Hogwarts rules."

"This is more than teasing," Harry insisted. "It's malicious, and it's meant to make her feel worthless about herself. One of the girls called her a 'buck-toothed train wreck,' and then Finnegan called her 'beaver.' The only person in Gryffindor that will talk to her is Ginny Weasley, and she can't do it publicly because her brother won't let her. Something has to be done."

"What would you suggest, Mr. Potter?"

"Support her," Harry said immediately. "Make it clear that you're on her side, and that you'll listen and believe her if she tells you something. The other students will think twice about insulting her if she's obviously in good with you, and if they do try something, she knows she can come to you."

"That hardly sounds like proper etiquette for a professor, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said with a slight frown. "I agree that Miss Granger is treated unfairly, but you're asking me to treat her unfairly as well, albeit in the opposite manner."

"Yes, I suppose I am," Harry sighed. "I'm really asking you to be her friend, but I suppose you can't do that."

“Aren’t you forgetting something, Mr. Potter?”

Harry shook his head. “You’re going to say that I should be that friend, but you don’t understand. The reason that they torment her more than they did before is precisely because she’s already my friend. If she hadn’t defended me to Weasley a long time ago, they would have continued to leave her alone. What you don’t understand is that the more she is associated with me, the worse she’ll be treated.” He stopped and looked the Professor in the eye. “I can’t let this continue, Professor. I mean no disrespect to you or the ideals of your house, but I’ve already tried the rational approach, and it was completely rejected. The only other option I have is to subdue them with force, and I’d rather not do that.” He paused. “But I will if I have to.” He finished quietly.

McGonagall eyed Harry thoughtfully while she considered what he’d said.

Her first reaction was to reprimand him for such a thinly veiled threat, but as she looked at the boy in front of her she knew instinctively that he didn’t deserve such a response. Truth be told, she agreed with him, especially about Miss Granger’s treatment, which had frustrated her for some time. She knew the girl was brilliant from her essays, but whenever she called on the young woman in class, she would clam up and only give the barest of acceptable answers. It was obvious that she was shunned by the rest of the house, but McGonagall had originally hoped that time would solve that problem for her; it now appeared that wouldn’t happen.

“Mr. Potter, as much as I agree with you about Miss Granger, I am honor bound to obey the rules that come with being a Professor. While I would like nothing better than to see Miss Brown and Mr. Finnegan change their attitudes, I cannot condone you doing so forcibly, no matter how good your intentions.”

“I understand your position, and I respect your dedication to what you believe is right,” Harry said slowly. “But I think you’re wrong about Hermione. This place is killing her slowly, and I won’t let it continue.”

The two sat in silence for a moment before McGonagall sighed and changed the subject.

“Well, since we are here, we might as well discuss your work. How are you faring with the more gradual focus in transfiguration?”

As the two began to talk about the finer aspects of transfiguration, Dumbledore calmly slipped out of the room into the hallway. For a moment he'd been afraid that Harry had sensed him, and had immediately masked his presence completely, cursing himself for underestimating the boy yet again. The conversation he'd just witnessed was enlightening, and it gave him yet another idea.

The headmaster made his way to the Gryffindor common room and stepped through before asking a young girl if she knew where he could find Hermione Granger. The terrified girl had managed to stutter the word library, and the headmaster thanked her as he left.

He finally found Hermione with her nose buried in an advanced Arithmancy book with a frown on her face.

“Good evening, Miss Granger,” he said serenely, causing Hermione to jump. “May I sit with you?”

“S-Sure,” Hermione answered, bewildered.

“Ah, the wonders of Arithmancy,” Dumbledore said, eyeing her book. “Truly a fascinating subject, if I do say so myself.”

“Yes, I mean, I think so too, sir,” Hermione replied, still flustered. Dumbledore just smiled at her kindly.

“Now then, Miss Granger, it has come to my attention that several of your housemates have been treating you rather harshly due to your association with young Mr. Potter. Is this true?”

“Uh, well,” Hermione stammered, looking down at the desk.

“There's no need to be nervous, Miss Granger,” Dumbledore said kindly. “I am aware that young men and women are often less than

cordial with each other. However, I happen to believe that Mr. Potter is a rather remarkable young man, and he deserves all the support he can get. I would hate to see him lose your friendship because of prejudice.”

“That’s precisely the problem, sir, prejudice,” Hermione exclaimed, her nervousness temporarily forgotten. “I mean, I know he’d never do anything like what they’re accusing him of, but they won’t listen! Harry even tried being nice, sir, he really did, and they just called him a liar!”

“Calm yourself, Miss Granger,” Dumbledore replied, chuckling. “I have spoken to Professor Lupin and I understand what happened. However, I am also concerned that their treatment of you goes past simple teasing, and I intend to speak with your housemates personally to see that it does not continue.”

Hermione was gobsmacked. The headmaster was going to personally make sure she didn’t get made fun of anymore? What in the world was going on?

“I see that surprises you, but it shouldn’t. I take the safety of all my students very seriously, Miss Granger. You are a very bright witch, never let anyone tell you otherwise.”

“I-I won’t sir,” Hermione replied, still somewhat awed. “Thank you.”

“It was my pleasure, dear girl. If you ever need a friendly ear, I shall be most happy to oblige.”

With that, the headmaster got up and walked slowly back to his office.

Three days after his meeting with McGonagall, Harry was sitting with Row in the library when Hermione walked in.

“Well, he did it. He really did it,” she said in a disbelieving voice.

“Uh, Hermione?” Row giggled. “Who did what?”

“Dumbledore, he talked to Ron, Seamus, Parvati, all the 3rd year Gryffindors, and told them to leave me alone.”

"Dumbledore talked to them?" Harry asked skeptically. "Are you sure it wasn't McGonagall?"

"No, it was Dumbledore," Hermione said assuredly. "He told me he was going to, but I didn't believe it."

"He talked to you?" Harry asked. Hermione nodded. "When?"

"The same time you had your meeting with McGonagall."

"Hmm," Harry said thoughtfully. "Well, I guess we owe him one. Have they said anything to you?"

Hermione shook her head.

"Not a word."

"Well," Row said, smiling. "Score one for the good guys then!"

Hermione huffed and shook her head, but it didn't go unnoticed by Harry that she seemed genuinely happy by the new development.

Maybe the old man isn't so bad after all, he thought to himself as he turned back to his book.

Later that week Harry produced his first corporeal patronus during his lesson with Lupin: a giant silver stag.

"Prongs," said Lupin in an awed whisper as the stag pranced around the room.

"What?" Harry asked.

Lupin seemed to shake himself back to reality and Harry was shocked to see that he had tears in his eyes. Reaching out with leglimency, Harry got a vision of his father and Sirius Black standing next to each other before slowly morphing into a stag and a dog.

“Professor?” Harry questioned. “Did you say Prongs?”

“Yes, I did,” Lupin replied slowly, running his hand across his face. “Prongs was your father’s nickname. He was an animagus, and his form was a stag. Your patronus is identical, Harry; your patronus is Prongs.”

Harry took a moment to marvel at that before he turned a questioning look to Lupin.

“Did you ever go and run around with him? As a werewolf, I mean.”

Lupin looked at him in amazement.

“That’s right, how did you know?” he asked softly. Harry just shrugged and Lupin got a far off look in his eyes. “Sirius and Peter were animagi too, so in a way I guess we all were. Although my transformation was slightly less voluntary than theirs,” he said with a wry chuckle.

“What were their forms?”

“Sirius was a grim; a big black dog, and Peter was a rat.”

“A rat? You’re kidding.”

“No, I’m not kidding,” Lupin said with a grin. “At first we laughed at him too, at least until he told us about how easy it was to sneak into the girl’s showers. Then Sirius wanted to trade.” Lupin had a big smile on his face now, and it was obvious to Harry that he was lost in his memories.

“Why didn’t anyone tell me before?” Harry asked quietly.

“It was a well-kept secret, actually,” Lupin replied. “All three were unregistered, and only became animagi to keep me company on the full moon. You know where the Shrieking Shack is, in Hogsmede?” Harry nodded. “That’s where I used to go during the full moon so that

it was safe. One of the reasons people think it's haunted is because of the noises I used to make when I had trapped myself in there."

Harry looked at Lupin seriously.

"Thank you for being honest with me."

"I make it a rule not to make the same mistake twice," Lupin replied wryly. Harry eyed him approvingly. "In any case, I think you've broke some sort of record for casting a corporeal patronus, so now comes the hard part. I'll talk to the headmaster about setting up some sort of ward to re-create a dementor's effects. We'll start on that after the holidays."

"You know how to create wards?" Harry asked curiously.

"Some," Lupin replied with a shrug. "Only the most basic though, and nothing with significant range. Ward-casting is extremely complex, Harry, even for fully-trained wizards. Other than professional curse-breakers, it's a very rare skill."

"Do you think it would be possible for me to watch as you and the headmaster set up the ward?"

"I don't see why not, I'll let you know."

Harry thanked Lupin for his help and walked out of the room with a spring in his step. He was on his way to the dungeons when his messenger started to vibrate.

Hey Harry, you there?

Yeah Jack, I'm here. What's up?

I've been thinking about what Dumbledore said in his letter.

I thought we already talked about that.

No, you told me we weren't going, and I said we should talk about it in person.

Jack, the Weasley's hate me, especially their youngest son. If we go over there, it will be a nightmare, I already told you all this.

I understand that, but if there's a way for me to be a part of you and Row's world, then I want to know about it. Be honest, do you not want to go because it's dangerous or because you just won't enjoy it.

There was a pause.

Let's talk about this later, I have to go.

When?

I'll come see you tomorrow night, how about that?

Ok, see you then.

With a sigh, Harry put the messenger away and hurried back to the common room.

The next night after classes Harry made himself invisible and slipped out of the castle before walking to Hogsmede and apparating to meet Jack.

"I think you grew," Jack joked when he saw him. "Master Choi told me to ask if you'd been keeping up on your exercises."

"Not like I should," Harry admitted, taking a seat in front of Jack. "There's nobody to practice against, and I'm pretty busy with all the different spell research I'm doing."

Jack nodded sympathetically.

"So," he began. "About this Dumbledore thing, I really want to go, Harry; I think it's important."

Harry groaned.

"Why?"

"You and Row have this whole other world, Harry," Jack said almost wistfully. "I mean, don't get me wrong, I love my life," he grinned. "But I miss the two of you, and if there's a way for me to live my life normally but still know what's going on in your world, then I want to know about it. Harry, you have to admit that it's only going to get harder for me to be a part of Row's life if I stay in the real world forever. Think about it, I'll never have anything to talk to either of you about, and I won't understand most of the stuff you're interested in. We'll practically be strangers. I don't want that."

"I don't want that either, Jack," Harry said earnestly. "But I think you're putting too much faith in Dumbledore, and I know you're putting too much faith in the Weasleys."

"Row said the girl is ok," Jack pointed out.

"That's true, but they have one girl and like 20 boys, and every one of them hates me. We can find another way."

"You're exaggerating."

"I don't think so."

"Well, I'm not even going to meet the people you know, I'm going to meet their cousin, who's like me. She works as an accountant in both worlds. Both worlds, Harry. I need to do this."

Harry considered his brother thoughtfully for a moment.

"There's something else, isn't there?" He asked after a slight pause. "What's the other reason Jack?"

Jack sighed heavily and wrung his hands together.

"Dumbledore said he'll bring my uncle," Jack said quietly before looking back at Harry. "Don't you see, Harry? I have to know! I have to know why he left, and why we never heard from him! I know you said he's a git, but..." he trailed off before continuing quietly. "He's my uncle, Harry. I have to face him."

Harry sighed heavily and ran his hand through his hair. Jack was right. No matter how much he hated Snape, Jack deserved chance the confront him. He also knew that Jack deserved the opportunity to meet other squibs; he just wished it could somebody not related to the Weasleys.

“When were you planning on going?”

“They invited us all over the week after Christmas, any day we want. I got a letter from Molly Weasley saying she was anxious to meet me and to see Row again.” He looked at Harry seriously. “You never answered my question from before. Do you really think we’ll be in danger, or do you just not want to go?”

“I really really don’t want to go,” Harry said honestly. “I get too much of their family already, and the last thing I need is to meet the parents.” He paused. “But, if you want to go, then I’ll go with you. Just don’t say anything nice about me, or they’ll probably start hating you too.”

“You don’t have to go, you know,” Jack said slowly. “I could go by myself, it wouldn’t be that big of a deal.”

“No, if you’re going, I’m going,” Harry said firmly. “I just wish we were going someplace else.” He muttered.

“Thanks, Harry,” Jack said, standing up to slap him on the back. “I really appreciate it.”

Christmas with the Weasleys, Harry thought sarcastically to himself as he prepared to apparate back. Great. Just sodding great.

Two days later after Harry’s meeting with Jack, another meeting took place in an empty classroom in the Hogwarts dungeons, and its purpose was far less benign. In attendance were Daphne Greengrass, Theodore Nott, Draco Malfoy, Pansy Parkinson, Vincent Crabbe,

Gregory Goyle, Marcus Flint, Adrian Pucey, Milicent Blistrode, Graham Montague, and Miles Bletchley.

“So, does everyone understand? We stop right now, no more.” Malfoy said. “Good.” He nodded to Flint, who removed the silencing charm from the room and watched as everyone filed out.

“Greengrass, wait,” he said as she passed.

“Ok, what? You still don’t get it?” She asked when everyone else had left.

“I don’t see why we don’t get him ourselves,” Malfoy snarled as he placed a silencing charm over the two of them. “And why are we stopping now?” Daphne gave an exasperated sigh.

“How many times have you and your boys thrown the Hufflepuffs around in the last month?”

“I don’t know,” Malfoy shrugged. “A few.”

“And how many detentions have you had? How many times have you been caught? How many Puffs are even mad at you for it?”

“What’s your point?”

“My point is, everyone thinks you’re acting under Potter’s orders, so he’s the one they blame for it. Do you have any idea how hard it is to make Hufflepuffs angry?” She snorted. “It’s almost impossible, but we’ve done it. They’re angry now, and guess what? They’re not angry at you! The Gryffindorks are angry too, and they’re not angry at you either! Half the school thinks that Potter is using the rest of us to carry out his dark plans! Don’t you see!” She said, exasperated. “Between what your father put in the paper and what we’ve been doing, they’re so afraid of him they can’t see straight. And the best part is that even if we ever do get caught, we just say that we’re as afraid of Potter as the rest of the school,” she put a scared expression on her face and started sniffing. “I had no choice! He had snakes, I was so scared!” She wiped her eyes and laughed. “He gets punished, we go free.”

"If they're afraid of him, how do you know they're going to try something?"

"We just have to be patient."

"But why are we stopping?" Malfoy pressed. "If I can still get away with it and Potter gets blamed, why stop now?"

"Because if Potter finds out, this is all worthless," Daphne responded carefully. "We've already set the stage, and anything else just makes it more likely we'll get caught. Look," she said, eyeing Malfoy seriously. "At this point, nobody in Hufflepuff or Gryffindor will trust him, and we have a scapegoat for anything else we want to do later. When something goes wrong, people used to suspect you, now they suspect him."

"So everything for the last month has been a set up? You didn't really want me to leave Potter alone?"

"Why fight yourself when you can get others to fight for you?" Daphne answered with a smirk. "Just remember, you can take credit for the plan, but you owe me."

"I remember," Malfoy replied. "And if I can see that Potter gets humiliated, it will be well worth it."

The last weeks of November were very strange for Harry. Because it was up to the Professors to choose what days he would spend with them, Harry himself never knew about the meetings more than a week in advance. He had assumed that he would have one every weekend, however, and was therefore surprised when his next two weekends were completely clear. After his meeting with the Ravensclaws, he found himself talking to other members of Row's house often, but was still forced to endure nothing but bitter comments and glares from the other two houses. Truthfully, he had all but given up on the idea of reconciling with Hufflepuff or Gryffindor, and by the time December came, he found he really didn't care.

The first week in December Harry had another “detention”, but it wasn’t with any of the other houses; it was with Dumbledore.

“Come in, Harry,” the headmaster said when he knocked. Harry entered to find the old wizard seated behind his large desk looking at him seriously. “I have some very important news for you, Harry. I suggest you sit down, it is quite serious.”

Harry eyed the old man uneasily, but sat down anyway.

“Harry, because of the incident with Professor Snape and Miss Thomas, I have avoided speaking to you regarding your living situation and done my best to allow you the freedom you deserve.” He paused for a moment and sighed. “Unfortunately, the same does not appear to be true of Professor Snape. At his insistence, the Minister of Magic has invoked a very old decree that forbids squibs from acting as the sole guardians of magical children. He plans to move you and Miss Thomas into a pure-blood family, Harry.”

For a moment, Harry’s eyes flashed with such pure rage that Dumbledore thought he was going to have to defend himself. But as quickly as it came, the anger was gone, as Harry put his many hours of emotional control to use.

“No,” he said coldly. “That’s unacceptable, and I won’t let him. Professor Snape probably wants to send us to the Malfoys,” he laughed humorlessly and clenched his hands into fists. “Let him try.”

“The exact family has not been decided yet, Harry,” Dumbledore replied carefully. “I myself found out only a week ago, and since then have been compiling a list of families that you may find suitable. I believe one of the Minister’s first choices was the Greengrass family.” Harry’s eyes narrowed at that. “As for when, he plans to act as soon as a suitable family is found.”

“I want to speak with a solicitor,” Harry said immediately. “We’re emancipated, and I refuse to let him rip my family apart.” He regarded Dumbledore coldly. “If you want me to stay anywhere close to this world, you’ll help me.”

"I'm afraid that magical law traditionally supersedes muggle law," Dumbledore said sadly. "And therefore there is very little I can do. You are emancipated as muggles, but as wizards, you are still children."

"I still want to speak with a solicitor, and soon," Harry snapped. "What possible basis can there be for this law?"

"The decree states that any member of a pure-blooded family should be raised by 'a suitable family of sufficient means and pure ancestry,'" Dumbledore replied.

"So rich pure-bloods have to raise other rich pure-bloods then," Harry snapped angrily. "I'm surprised Malfoy isn't all over this. I'm not a pure-blood, what about me?"

"The minister has been surprisingly secretive about the entire effort," Dumbledore said knowingly. "It is unlikely that Mr. Malfoy has heard of it. I myself might not have known, had I not had a chance encounter with an old friend. Afterwards, I immediately contacted the minister and advised him that it would be unwise for him to move one of you without the other."

"He's lucky then," Harry growled. He tried to collect his turbulent thoughts for a moment before he turned his hard gaze back to the headmaster.

"I suppose you're going to tell me I can't do anything to stop it?"

"I'm afraid not, Harry."

"You'll forgive me if I don't take your word for it," Harry said sarcastically. "It's rather ironic that Professor Snape started the process, but yet you only found out a week ago." He glared at the headmaster. "I don't suppose you just happened to have a few families lined up for me to talk to, do you?" His eyes narrowed. "And I'd better not hear you mention the name Weasley."

"The Weasleys are just one family that have expressed concern over your situation, Harry," Dumbledore replied, only slightly unnerved at

the boy's perceptiveness. "The Diggorys and the Macmillans are likewise interested, as is the Davies family. I know it seems like your freedom is being taken away, Harry, but you are not without options."

Harry, for his part, could not remember the last time he'd been this angry. At the moment, he felt like destroying the entire magical world one man at a time, starting with Albus Dumbledore.

"What happens now?" He ground out through gritted teeth.

"It is up to you, Harry," Dumbledore replied carefully. "I would suggest meeting with the families that you find least objectionable." When Harry's gaze flickered, Dumbledore nodded sadly. "Yes Harry, I am fully aware that there is no magical family that you would pick willingly, and that you find this entire matter a most egregious breach of your personal freedom." He paused before continuing. "Unfortunately, I cannot prevent it from happening. The best I can do is help you select the family to take you. I was able to convince the Minister of that much, at least." He looked at the young man seriously. "I am sorry I cannot do more, Harry."

Looking at Dumbledore, Harry was caught between warring emotions. On the one side, he was still incredibly angry since Dumbledore was part of the whole conspiracy, and probably had a lot more influence than he let on. On the other hand, he had told Harry what was coming, and was willing to give him options, despite the fact that he almost certainly could have just selected a family and put him there. The headmaster had also been instrumental in making Hermione's life easier in Gryffindor, and as near as Harry could tell, it appeared that Dumbledore actually did want to help him. In the end, he realized that he would need to calm down completely before he could formulate a proper plan, and there was no reason to turn down Dumbledore's help other than pure spite, so he agreed.

"Set up the meetings," he bit out. With that, he turned and strode angrily from the office.

It took him almost thirty minutes of meditation to completely calm down, and once he had the first thing he did was pull out his messenger to tell his siblings what he'd just learned. As expected,

they were as outraged as he was, and Jack even suggested telling the muggle police. Harry suggested that they wait at least until he was able to contact a wizarding solicitor, and the other two agreed.

The last weeks of term flew by for Harry, but he was so engrossed in his legal dilemma that he hardly noticed.

After speaking with three different solicitors, two of which were versed in both muggle and magical law, it was official: there was nothing they could do. Severus Snape was the only magical relative of Rowena Thomas, and was therefore fully within his rights to demand that she be raised in a purely magical household, regardless of her muggle standing. It was spiteful, backwards, and completely unfair, but it was also the law. In fact, if it hadn't been for Dumbledore, it was most likely that Harry and his sister wouldn't have even been consulted, and would have simply been shipped off to live with a family they'd never met. As loathe as he was to admit it, Dumbledore had done the two of them no small favor by allowing them to choose what family would have them, especially because it bought them both time. Because of their unique situation, it was decided that they would have to make a decision by the first of April, otherwise the decision would be made for them.

"That's barely over three months!" Row exclaimed when she heard. She and Harry were currently in their compartment in the Hogwarts Express on their way back to London for the Christmas Holidays. "How can we possibly make a decision to live with people we've only known for three months!"

"We've still got options," Harry said cryptically as he watched the people passing by their compartment carefully. "We'll talk about it when we get home."

"What are you looking at?" Row asked him. "It's just students."

Harry frowned.

"I've seen the same group pass by 5 times already," he replied, his eyes never leaving the door. "It's mostly first and second year Hufflepuffs, and I don't think it's a coincidence."

“What’d you mean?”

Harry shrugged. “Call it a hunch.”

Row just shrugged back and went back to her book. Harry noticed the same group pass by several more times until finally it stopped outside and one of the began to open the door.

“U-Uh,” one of the first years stammered. “S-Sorry, we thought this was s-somebody else’s compartment.” He finally ground out. However, the group made no move to leave when he had finished.

“Well?” Harry said quizzically. “Don’t let us keep you if you’re looking for someone.”

He noticed a couple of the boys look confused until one of them began whispering something and the entire group filed back out and into the hall.

“That was weird,” Row said when they had gone. Harry nodded his agreement but said nothing and they passed the rest of the ride in silence. When the train arrived at King’s Cross, they disembarked with the rest of the students and caught a taxi back home.

When the two finally reached their flat, they met a depressed looking Jack at the door and exchanged greetings before making their way inside.

“I still can’t believe this,” Jack said angrily. “They’re taking you away forever and there’s nothing I can do.”

“That’s not quite true,” Harry said slowly after he’d put his trunk in his room. He turned to his sister. “Row, we do have another option, but it would mean not going back to Hogwarts and hiding until you turn 17.”

“How would we pull that off?” She asked, surprised.

"Since the beginning of the year, I've been exchanging letters with Gringotts," Harry explained as he sat down. "I don't have unrestricted access to my family's money, but because I'm emancipated in the muggle world, I have a little more access to my family's estate than I normally would, and nobody knows, not even Dumbledore. In fact, the only goblin that knows what I've been doing is my account manager, but that's another story. Anyway, at the beginning of the year, I had my account manager buy us another place to live north of here, and since then I've had it heavily warded by Gringotts cursebreakers so that we could hide there if something went wrong."

"Plan B," Jack said, nodding.

"Right, plan B," Harry replied. "Originally, I had it set up in case Jack started having problems with people from the magical world like reporters, but the place is large enough for all three of us to live there if we need to. That reminds me," he said, breaking off suddenly. "I had portkeys made for all of us in case of an emergency, but they're registered with the Ministry, so you really shouldn't use it unless you absolutely have to. Anyway, where was I? Oh, if we do decide to go with plan B, then afterwards we could go to America for a while, or maybe Australia, but no matter where we went, they'd be looking for us, and unless we stayed inside all the time, we'd probably eventually get caught."

"Why don't we just move to one of those countries now?" Jack asked.

"You really think Dumbledore would just let us go like that?" Harry asked him skeptically. "They've made it quite clear that being emancipated means absolutely nothing to them, and neither do our opinions. We'd have to convince another magical government to grant us some sort of instant citizenship or amnesty, but to get that we'd have to fight a political battle against both Fudge and Dumbledore, so we'd probably lose. Not only that, but they'd know we wanted to run and they'd lock us up even tighter." He shook his head. "No, if we run, we hide. Anything else is just too risky."

"What's the other option?"

“The other option is to choose one of the families we’re meeting with after Christmas, and be good little children.” He finished sarcastically.

“What about Jack?”

Harry sighed.

“I don’t know. If we choose to stay in the magical world, we’ll have foster parents, and they’ll probably try to tell us what to do, so we’ll have to make sure that whoever we pick likes Jack, I guess.”

“How did they choose the families?” Jack asked.

“Dumbledore and Fudge finally agreed on a short list,” Harry replied. “That’s why the Weasley and Greengrass families aren’t on it.” At Jack’s confused look, he elaborated. “Dumbledore had some families that Fudge didn’t like, and Fudge had some families that Dumbledore didn’t like, so they had to compromise. They ended up with the Diggory, Davies, Edgecomb, and Macmillan families, and we have to pick one. If we don’t, Fudge gets to pick, and I can guarantee we won’t like that decision.”

“Why those four?” Asked Row.

“It’s strange, actually,” said Harry, scowling. “Fudge immediately dismissed all the traditional Gryffindor families, and Dumbledore did the same with the Slytherin families, so all we’ve got left are Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff.”

“Why is that weird?”

“Well, I see why Dumbledore vetoed the Slytherins, but why did Fudge attack the Gryffindors? You’d think that he’d want me with a Gryffindor,” he mused. “Plus, all the families that Fudge suggested, except Edgecomb and Davies, can be tied to Voldemort in one way or another, almost like he wants us in a dark family instead of a light one. I guess Fudge could be a closet dark wizard, but he doesn’t seem the type.”

Both Jack and Row looked unsettled at that.

“So what happens now?” Jack finally asked.

“Now we have a happy Christmas,” Harry said firmly. “We don’t have to meet anyone until next week, and there’s still three months before we have to make a final decision. There’s plenty of time to cut and run if we want to.”

“Do you want to, Harry?” Row asked quietly.

Harry considered the question before exhaling heavily.

“I don’t now,” he said quietly. “I just don’t know.”

The holiday passed all too quickly for the young trio, and before they knew it Christmas had arrived. The three exchanged gifts with each other, as usual, until Harry noticed a large, awkwardly shaped present under the tree with his name on it. He ran a series of wandless detection charms over it before he carefully unwrapped it to reveal the most magnificent broom he had ever seen.

“Wow Harry,” Row breathed when she saw it. “Who in the world sent you a Firebolt? Do you know how expensive those are?”

“Not exactly,” Harry said, frowning. “And there’s no note.” He spent the next several minutes carefully examining every aspect of the broom, both physical and magical, in precise detail, but came up with nothing out of the ordinary. Still, that fact that someone had anonymously sent him the best racing broom on the market left him more than a little suspicious, so he decided to try something else. Grabbing hold of the broom, Harry began to concentrate and, after a moment of focus, he could feel the magic in the broom, just as he had been able to before on Blaise’s Nimbus. He stretched the feeling farther, almost as if he was reaching into the magic that made the broom fly, and still he found nothing strange or troubling. Satisfied that the broom wasn’t cursed, he set it back on top of his pile of presents.

“How is it?” Row asked when he was finished.

“It feels powerful,” Harry admitted. “A lot more powerful than Blaise’s broom was. I can’t wait to try it out.”

“Can I try it after you?” Row asked. Harry agreed and the two rejoined their brother by the tree.

The day after Christmas was the day that Jack decided to visit the Weasleys, mainly because Harry had said there was no way he could enjoy the rest of the holiday with it hanging over his head. It was therefore with a sense of absolute dread that Harry entered the Leaky Cauldron, prepared to floo to the Burrow.

“Why do they call it the Burrow?” Jack asked as they waited in line.

“I have absolutely no idea,” Harry said. “And frankly, I don’t care, either.”

Row giggled.

“C’mon, it’s not that bad, maybe one of the older brothers will be there. I think one of them is a curse breaker, maybe he could help you with your warding.”

“Not with my luck,” Harry muttered, but he was already entering the floo so nobody heard him.

Harry arrived in the Weasley living room first, and was greeted with the smell of baking cookies and an empty room, which was a near perfect greeting for him.

The sound of somebody falling over announced Row’s arrival, and an instant later Jack also arrived face down. When they had regained their feet, the trio walked cautiously towards what they assumed was the kitchen.

“Hello?” Row said, taking the lead as she opened the door.

"Oh, you're early!" Came the voice of Molly Weasley as she came forward to greet them. She immediately engulfed Row in a hug before turning to Jack.

"And you must be Jack?" At his nod, she smiled. "My cousin is out back, and so is a friend of hers. They're both anxious to talk to you." Jack thanked her and threw a look at Harry before walking out the door at the back of the room.

Mrs. Weasley turned and greeted Harry somewhat stiffly before excusing herself and walking up the stairs.

"And so it begins," Harry muttered as he helped himself to some cookie dough.

"That wasn't like her at all," said Row with a frown. "She seemed almost, well...scared of you."

"She probably believes the prophet," Harry replied succinctly. "Or if not, then maybe she believes her children. They don't like me, Row; they might have told her I'm a raving lunatic for all we know."

Row continued to frown but said nothing, and the two waited in silence until the door opened again and Ginny Weasley entered.

"Row!" She exclaimed, giving her a hug. "I'm glad you came, it get so annoying around here without another girl around." She turned and her gaze landed on Harry. "Oh," she said, blushing slightly. "Hi, uh, Harry."

"Hello Ginny," Harry replied politely. "How are you?"

Ginny just blushed harder and it was Harry could do not to roll his eyes in exasperation. At that moment, the door directly behind Harry burst open and someone grabbed him by the shoulder, trying to push him out of the way. Instantly, Harry grabbed the offending hand by the wrist and stepped back, simultaneously pulling his attacker forward and swinging his other arm around his opponents neck. When he saw the telltale sign of bright red hair, he loosened his grip and let the boy go.

“What the hell, Potter?” Ron Weasley rasped, clutching his throat.

“Sorry,” Harry replied, not really sorry at all. “Instinct.”

Ron looked like he was going to say something else, but was cut off by Mr. Weasley.

“Now Ron, you didn’t have to come barreling into the room like that,” he said diplomatically. “And you definitely didn’t have to grab young Harry here to force him out of the way.”

“I’m guessing he won’t do it again, in any case,” said another young man from behind Mr. Weasley. Harry also noticed that Percy and the twins had entered the room and were watching the exchange. Harry turned his gaze back to the head of the Weasley family.

“Hello, Mr. Weasley,” Harry greeted the man politely. “I apologize for that sir, but I don’t like to be startled.” Arthur Weasley nodded.

“Don’t worry yourself, young man,” he said, extending his hand. “Good to see you again. Ginny speaks very highly of you and your sister, and I’m glad to get this opportunity to talk with you.” The man eyed him speculatively, and Harry understood the hidden message. Arthur Weasley didn’t trust him, but he didn’t mistrust him either, and that was something Harry could respect.

“I’m glad as well, sir,” Harry said as he shook the man’s hand. He turned to the other man next to him and introduced himself. Percy and twins gave him a brief nod as they followed Ron out of the room.

“Good to meet you Harry,” the man said cordially. “I’m Charlie.”

“Charlie works with dragons,” Ginny piped up.

“Dragons, really?” Row squeaked. “Real dragons?”

Charlie laughed.

“Yes, real dragons. Have you ever seen one?” Row shook her head. “Well, you really should, they’re amazing creatures. Just ask Ginny, she’s seen the ones I work with.”

Ginny joined their conversation while Harry continued to stand there somewhat awkwardly.

“You have a son who is a cursebreaker for Gingotts, right?” He asked, turning to Mr. Weasley. “Is he here?”

“No, I’m afraid Bill had to get back to work immediately,” Mr. Weasley answered. “He’s working on some very important sites in Egypt, and couldn’t spare the time.” He paused and looked into the kitchen, where Ron was helping himself to the cookies. “Tell me Harry, do you play Quidditch? I think the boys were just getting ready for a game.”

“No, I’ve never played,” admitted. “I just learned how to ride a broom not too long ago.”

“Never played Quidditch?” Charlie asked, aghast. “That won’t do at all. Hey Ron,” he called into the kitchen. “Why didn’t you tell us Harry had never played Quidditch before?”

Ron glared at Harry before answering.

“I didn’t know,” he admitted. “Why, scared Potter?”

Harry frowned and turned back to Charlie, ignoring him.

“Come on,” the older boy said, leading him into the kitchen. You’ll be with me and Ginny, Ron will be with Fred and George. We play to 100, no seeker, just a chaser, a keeper, and a beater. Sound good?”

“I didn’t say I would play,” Harry pointed out.

“Oh come on,” Charlie replied. “You’ve never played before, it’s fun, and over here you don’t have to worry about too many people watching. What have you got to lose?”

Harry thought about that for a moment before deciding that he really didn't have anything to lose, and pulled out his shrunken Firebolt, ignoring the shocked looks on other boy's faces.

"Is that a Firebolt?" Charlie asked in awe.

"Yeah," Harry replied absently. "I've never actually tried it out, though."

"I've never even seen one of those," Charlie said as they made their way outside. "They're supposed to be absolutely amazing in the air, you're pretty lucky. Anyway, what position do you want to play, Harry?"

"Chaser," Harry answered after a moment of thought.

"Alright, that works perfectly. I'll be our beater and Ginny can play keeper, ok Gin?" Ginny nodded and the three took to the air.

"Everyone ready?" Called Arthur Weasley. "Begin!" He tossed the quaffle into the air and the game was on.

Having never actually handled a quaffle before, Harry was worried that he would drop it, but found it surprisingly easy to handle. The instant the ball left Mr. Weasley's hand, he shot in a dive and caught the ball easily before pulling up and darting past Fred, who was playing chaser for the opposing team.

He felt a bludger coming at him from the side and evaded it almost lazily before he aimed a shot at the far left ring and let go. Unfortunately, Harry had never been one for sports when he was younger, and the ball sailed well wide of the hoop before it was recovered by Ron who passed it to Fred.

Harry spun his broom around, marveling at its maneuverability and speed as he approached Fred from above, diving at the last moment to knock the quaffle from the older boy's grip. Harry adjusted his dive and caught the ball as it fell to the ground before twisting around another bludger and shooting back down the pitch, once again aiming a shot and once again missing badly.

And so began possibly the strangest game of Quidditch ever witnessed at the Burrow. Harry's flying skills surpassed Fred's by so much that the redhead had only been able to get three shots on Ginny, scoring once. Harry, on the other hand, had lost count of how many times he had shot against Ron, but unfortunately the majority of his shots were so wild that they never had a chance. If it hadn't been obvious from the look on his face that Harry was trying very hard to score, Ron would have thought he was toying with them with the way he constantly stole the quaffle from Fred and lazily evaded bludgers from George. If Ron was honest with himself, he had to admit he'd never seen anyone fly as naturally as Harry Potter did. This, of course, only made him angrier.

Finally, after an hour of flying circles around everyone on the pitch but only scoring 4 times, Harry decided he'd had enough and motioned for Charlie and Ginny to follow him to the ground.

"Oi, what'd you think you're doing!" Ron called when he saw them. "The game's not over!"

"I don't want to play anymore," Harry called back. "Call it a draw, I'm hungry."

"There's no draws in Quidditch!" Ron yelled, aghast. "If you quit, you forfeit, that's the rule."

"Ok, then we forfeit," Harry replied, shrugging. All he'd really wanted to do was fly around anyway.

If possible, Ron's face turned even redder at that.

"Calm down, Ron," Charlie said reasonably. "He's not a Weasley, and this was his first game, so the usual rules don't apply."

"What's the matter, are you scared?" Ron yelled, ignoring his brother. "Afraid you'll get hurt, or embarrass yourself?" He called nastily.

Completely ignoring Ron's taunts, Harry turned and started back towards the house, where he was met by a laughing Jack and Row.

"That was awesome! You looked like you were born in the air," he exclaimed, slapping Harry on the back. "Angela, that's one of the girl's I'm here to meet, said you're the best she's ever seen."

"I don't know about that," Harry said modestly. "I couldn't seem to hit those rings to save my life. Still, it was nice to get out any fly, at least."

When they reached the house, Mr. Weasley approached them.

"That was some very impressive flying, Harry," he said. "Are you on your house team?"

Harry snorted.

"I'm afraid the Slytherin house team is bought and paid for by Draco Malfoy, and he doesn't like me very much. So no, I'm not on my house team. I just like to fly."

"I'd say you do a fair job of it, too," Charlie said with a grin.

"Yes, I can understand why," Mr. Weasley agreed. "And I understand what you mean about the Malfoys; they think they can buy anything."

Harry shrugged.

"In this case, they're right."

"What's the big idea, Potter?" Harry turned to find Ron Weasley storming up to him angrily. "I know we're better than you, but I didn't expect you to forfeit like a coward."

"I didn't feel like playing anymore," Harry replied with a shrug.

"Leave him alone, Ron," Mr. Weasley broke in smoothly. "For his first Quidditch match, I'd say he did pretty well." Ron glared daggers at Harry and stormed out of the room.

"If you don't mind me asking, Harry," said Mr. Weasley when Ron had left. "Ron doesn't seem to like you very much, do you know why?"

"Don't know and don't care," Harry replied succinctly. Mr. Weasley frowned and shot a look at Charlie, who was about to respond when Albus Dumbledore entered the room, followed by the absolute last person Harry wanted to see: Severus Snape.

Snape, for his part, didn't appear to be any happier about the situation than Harry was, if the scowl on his face was any indication.

"Ah, hello Harry," Dumbledore greeted him jovially. "Having fun?"

"What's he doing here," Harry asked coldly.

"Mr. Thomas asked specifically for his presence, Harry," Dumbledore admonished slightly.

Remembering what Jack had said before, Harry scowled but said nothing. Dumbledore greeted Mr. Weasley as well and Harry went back outside to get Jack.

"Jack, Snape's here," he said, coming up next to the older boy. "Do you want Row and I to stay with you?"

Jack took a deep breath but shook his head. Harry gave him a questioning look, to which Jack shook his head more firmly.

"No, I have to do this alone."

Harry sighed.

"Alright, just don't look him in the eyes."

As much as he didn't like it, Harry knew this was something that Jack had to do, and turned to go back inside just as Snape and Dumbledore came out.

"No wands," Harry said, standing in front of the two Professors.

“What?” Snape asked incredulously.

“I said no wands,” Harry repeated slowly. “I don’t trust you, so give your wand to the headmaster.”

“Why you-” Snape snarled, but was cut off by Dumbledore.

“It is a reasonable request, Severus,” he said calmly. “The boy is no threat to you, certainly.”

Fuming, Snape pulled out his wand and thrust it into Dumbledore hand before returning his vicious glare to Harry, who ignored him and walked calmly back inside.

Dumbledore came in shortly thereafter, and since he had no desire to actually have a conversation with the old wizard, Harry promptly excused himself. As he walked around the Burrow, his mind wandered between being worried about Jack and worried that he’d run into another Weasley. Finally, he decided he’d take a walk outside and started toward the front door, where he found Charlie.

“Hey Harry,” Charlie greeted him. “I see from the look on your face that you’ve seen Snape.”

“He’s here to see Jack,” Harry replied.

“Yeah, I know,” Charlie answered. “Dad told me about your situation. I know it doesn’t count for much, but I’m sorry. Fudge can be a real git when he wants to. Any idea what you’re going to do?”

“Not yet.” Harry answered succinctly.

“I’m sure there are lot of families that would be happy to take you,” Charlie continued. “It just seems pretty ridiculous when you’ve been living on your own for so long.”

Harry nodded but said nothing, and Charlie laughed.

“You don’t talk much, do you?”

Harry shook his head.

“No.”

Charlie shook his head in amusement and was about to respond when they heard a commotion coming from the back of the house. With Charlie close behind him, Harry walked swiftly back inside to investigate.

What he found was a disheveled Severus Snape being magically restrained by Albus Dumbledore. When he took a closer look at Snape and realized that his right eye was swelling up, he grinned. Unfortunately, Snape chose that exact moment to look at him.

“YOU PLANNED THIS!” Snape roared. “I’LL GET YOU FOR THIS, POTTER! YOU-” He was abruptly silenced by a very tired looking Albus Dumbledore, who gave a heavy sigh.

“I trust this was not your intention, Harry?” He asked.

“Harry had nothing to do with it,” Jack said angrily as he entered the room. “That foul bastard is no uncle of mine, and he deserved a lot worse for what he said.” He glared at Snape. “If I ever see him again, it will be too soon.” He said coldly.

“Very well,” Dumbledore sighed. “Then we will be leaving. I hope that our meeting tomorrow goes more smoothly.” He finished with a slight warning in his tone. Harry was about to tell him exactly what he could do with his warnings, but the two had already vanished from the room.

Harry turned to look at Jack, who was still fuming.

“I take it he was his usual self, then?”

“Too right,” Jack snorted. “He’s everything you said and more. Hell, I’m glad he never came around before, and that’s saying something.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said earnestly. “I know you were hoping for something better.”

Jack paused in thought for a moment before replying.

"I actually hate him now," he said softly. "I hate my own uncle, how about that?"

There was a pregnant pause before Harry replied.

"Think about who you're talking to, Jack," he said quietly.

Jack's eyes widened and he started to apologize, but Harry just waved him off.

"Don't worry about it, it's over." He eyed Jack seriously. "The three of us have each other now, and that's all that matters." Jack could only nod solemnly in reply as the two rejoined the others in the dining room.

"Oi, did you really hit Snape?" One of the twins asked Jack when they entered. Jack nodded sheepishly.

"Our hero has arrived!" The twins exclaimed together, motioning Jack over to them. "Jack, my boy, I believe we'll be great friends! Have a seat."

Jack looked at the two skeptically, but took a seat on their side of the table. Harry took his own seat across from them in-between Row and Charlie. The group made small talk as they ate.

"So then, Rowena, Ginny tells me that you're quite the student." Molly Weasley said after a while, throwing a look at the twins. "Tell me, what subjects do you enjoy most?"

"Actually, I like all my subjects, Mrs. Weasley," Row said. "But Charms is probably my favorite."

"It certainly won't be potions after what your brother just did," George laughed. Mrs. Weasley threw him a warning glare.

"I hear good things about you from the Ravenclaw prefects," Percy put in pompously. "If continue, you have a chance at becoming a prefect yourself."

"And then you can be like ickle perfect prefect Percy!" Fred said sarcastically.

"And she'd want to do that why?" Jack muttered, earning him a laugh from both Fred and George and a glare from Percy.

"Oh you boys, hush," Mrs. Weasley said. "Why charms dear?" She asked, turning back to Row.

"What did he say that made you hit him, anyway?" Fred asked Jack, turning away from his mother's conversation.

Jack's face clouded over.

"I really would rather not say," he said quietly.

"Understandable, of course," Mr. Weasley broke in. "That man has never had a friendly temperament."

There were scattered chuckles at this before Molly Weasley stood and announced that it was time for dessert.

Most of the Weasley's faces lit up at that, as did Row's, but Harry found himself feeling uneasy. Jack was talking and laughing with the twins, and Row was giggling quietly with Ginny, yet he couldn't shake the feeling that something was amiss.

"Something wrong, Harry?" Charlie asked him quietly.

Harry shook his head.

"I'm feeling a bit lightheaded," he lied. "Maybe it was all that Quidditch."

"I'm sorry to hear that," the older boy said earnestly. "I thought maybe you were feeling uncomfortable with the rest of our family because of

Ron.” Harry looked at him sharply as he continued. “He’s always been a bit of a hothead, so don’t take anything he says too seriously.” He chuckled. “It looks like you tend to set him off.”

Harry shrugged.

“He doesn’t like me, that’s no secret. And to be honest, I’ve got more important things to worry about.”

Charlie considered the young man seriously for a moment, but could only nod in acknowledgement before turning back to his desert.

Harry and Row returned to Hogwarts on January 2nd, and Harry spent the first two weeks of term trying desperately to find a solution to the adoption problem. Every day brought them closer to the April 1st deadline, and yet he was no closer to finding an answer than he had been when Dumbledore gave him the news. In the weeks following their visit to the Weasleys, Harry, Jack, and Row had met with two of their potential foster families, and neither meeting had gone well.

The Edgecombs had seemed like a nice enough group, that is until Mrs. Edgecomb realized that Jack was a squib, and immediately forbade any child of hers from contact with him. That had ended their meeting rather suddenly.

Their second meeting, with the Macmillan family, had gone better, but it was far from a perfect fit. It was immediately clear where Ernie Macmillan got his fondness for rules, as his father laid out a typical summer schedule with nearly every hour already planned out. Harry had used legilimency to determine the man’s motivations, and although he did detect an honest desire to help, the idea of currying favor with Dumbledore and the notoriety from raising such well-known children were the two primary reasons he was interested. Harry let the meeting proceed as planned, but inwardly he decided he would rather go to Plan B than live with the Macmillans.

Their third meeting, with the Davies family, was scheduled for January 15th, but Mr. Davies contacted Dumbledore at the last moment and said that he would have to reschedule because of a family emergency. That left their last meeting with the Diggorys, scheduled for January 22nd.

Since the 22nd was a Sunday, Harry and Row spent the early part of the day studying before they met Dumbledore in his office. Together, he and Row portkeyed to their flat to pick up Jack before taking another portkey to the Diggory house. They arrived in the living room and were immediately greeted by a tall, brunette woman who introduced herself as Pricilla Diggory.

"Thank you for having us, Mrs. Diggory," Row said politely. "You have a lovely home."

"Why thank you child," Mrs. Diggory replied with a smile. "The men are waiting in the sitting room, if you'll follow me."

The three followed Mrs. Diggory down a long hallway that ended in a smaller, cozy looking room where Amos and Cedric Diggory sat, talking in low tones to one another.

"Ah, you must be Harry then," Mr. Diggory said as they entered, standing to shake his hand. "And this must be Row, which makes you Jack. A pleasure to meet you."

"A pleasure to meet you too sir," Jack replied formally.

"This is my son Cedric," Cedric stood and shook Jack's hand as well, but made no move to acknowledge Harry. "Of course, you two must know that, going to Hogwarts and all." Mr. Diggory gave his son a proud look. "I'd imagine he's quite the popular one, am I right?"

Harry was about to respond when he noticed that Row was blushing rather profusely, and frowned.

"Hello Cedric," Row said shyly. When he smiled at her, her flush deepened. Jack turned his gaze from Row to glare at Cedric.

“Ah yes,” Mr. Diggory chuckled. “Quite the heartbreaker, aren’t you Ced? Now then,” he said, his face growing serious. “You know why we’re all here. Personally, I think it’s absolutely despicable that the Minister would try to force you apart, but,” he paused for a moment with a strange look on his face, and Harry hastily withdrew his legilimency probe. Mr. Diggory shook his head before continuing. “Where was I? Oh yes, the minister. Well, as I’m sure you know, there isn’t much to be done. Pricilla and I never intended Cedric to be an only child, but things don’t always go as planned, so here we are. Let me begin by saying that if you do choose to come stay with us, Jack will be welcome anytime. In fact, we’d be happy to have you live with us as well.”

Jack looked speechless at that.

“Don’t look so surprised,” Mrs. Diggory chuckled. “Not all pure-blood families hold such backward beliefs about squibs. My Great Aunt couldn’t cast a spell to save her life, but she was a fearsome woman in her own right.” She regarded Jack kindly. “We’d be happy to have you.”

Harry was careful not to make the same mistake twice, but found that unlike her husband, Mrs. Diggory had no occlumency training, and surprisingly, everything she said was true.

“Well, I think I speak for all us when I say that’s a relief,” Jack said jokingly. The Diggorys all smiled.

“We understand that you’ve been living by yourselves for some time,” Mrs. Diggory continued. “And we don’t want to jeopardize what you already have with each other.”

“Of course, we’d expect you to live by the same rules Cedric does,” Mr. Diggory said seriously. “We understand that may be hard for you to accept, and believe me when I say we’ll do our best to respect your independence. If anything, we see ourselves more as guardians than parents.”

“Yes, you all seem very mature already,” Mrs. Diggory said with a smile. “But we’d be happy to talk to you about anything, anything at all.” Both Mr. and Mrs. Diggory smiled.

“Dad?” Cedric broke in. “I’d like to have a word with Harry in private, if you don’t mind.”

Mr. Diggory looked at his son quizzically for a moment before he threw a questioning look at Harry. Harry nodded and stood to follow Cedric out of the room. Cedric led him down the hallway and into a smaller room that appeared to be some sort of office.

“Ok, Potter, here’s the deal,” Cedric began when they were alone. “Dumbledore says that most of the rumors going around about you aren’t true, and that’s good enough for me at Hogwarts, but not when it comes to my family.” He looked at Harry seriously. “If you’re going to be living here, I have to trust you, and right now, I can’t do that.”

“First, I need to know what rumors you’re talking about,” Harry replied.

“Don’t play dumb,” Cedric said angrily. “Even if you’re not behind it, you still know what’s going on, and that’s bad enough.”

“Actually, I don’t know what’s going,” Harry said, narrowing his eyes. “Why don’t you tell me?”

“You want to act that way? Fine.” Cedric went to the desk behind him and picked up a vial. “Then you won’t mind answering some questions under Veritaserum.”

Inwardly, Harry cringed.

“If you want to know something, I suggest you just ask.”

“Will you take it or not?” Cedric demanded.

Harry knew he was trapped. He couldn’t take the Veritaserum, of course, not without knowing the questions Cedric was going to ask. All it would take was a question like “what do you not want to tell me,” and all of Harry’s secrets would be laid bare. It was possible that he

would be able to fight the potion, but that wasn't a chance he was willing to take. He sighed.

"No."

Cedric looked at him sadly.

"I see."

With that, he put the vial back on the desk and walked back down the hall to the sitting room. Harry followed him, and entered to find Jack and Row laughing at something Mrs. Diggory had just said. They smiled when he entered, but Cedric went immediately to his father and whispered something in his ear, causing him to frown.

"I thought we settled this already," Harry overheard him say.

"I'm sorry," Cedric replied in a normal voice. "But I don't trust him, no matter what Dumbledore says."

Jack and Row looked at Harry quizzically, who shook his head.

"Excuse us for a moment, please," Mr. Diggory said, leaving the room with Cedric.

"What was that all about?" Row asked when they had gone.

"He's afraid I'm evil, like the papers said, I guess," Harry said with a sigh.

"Oh, I'm sure that's not it," Mrs. Diggory said lightly. "Amos was the one who investigated what happened at Hogwarts, after all. He's never spoken ill of you to us, I know that much."

Harry just shrugged at her and the four of them made small talk for a while before Mr. Diggory returned to the room alone.

"I'm sorry about that, Harry," he said.

“You don’t have to apologize,” Harry said, waving the man off. “You should know, I seem to have a knack for making more enemies than friends.”

Both Diggorys eyed him sadly and Harry found himself hoping someone would change the subject.

“So,” Row broke the uncomfortable silence. “What else can you tell us about living here?”

The rest of the meeting continued without incident, and when it was over Harry and Row portkeyed back to their flat with Jack before returning to Hogwarts. All three of them agreed that the Diggorys seemed like the obvious choice, and that the only potential problem was with Cedric. Harry promised to see what he could do about that in the coming weeks.

Apart from the adoption issue, the rest of Harry’s time at Hogwarts was remarkably quiet. He continued with his patronus lessons, and the first week in February, Lupin was finally able to create a primitive nightmare ward that would re-create a lighter version of the terror inspired by dementors. Although Harry found the ward distracting, it only took him two lessons before he was able to completely overcome it and cast his patronus without difficulty. Lupin had been absolutely amazed and stated that he could try to make the ward stronger, but other than that Harry had learned everything he had to teach.

Truth be told, Harry was more interested in the spell itself than its effects. Because it was only a weak ward, it consisted of a focus stone and only one set of 5 rune stones, 5 being the number of the mind in Arithmancy, and therefore the best choice for a ward with mental effects. Because the desired effects were dark in nature, each rune stone was inscribed with a rune carefully selected from the set of six; meaning that each rune was drawn using 6 separate movements, since six is the Arithmancy number associated with dark or evil purpose. And yet, as complicated as it all was, Harry found that seeing a ward constructed in front of his eyes helped him understand the process much more clearly, and he resolved to test his new knowledge soon.

The Saturday after his second Patronus lesson, Harry decided to join Blaise and Tracey in Hogsmede. He hadn't spent much time with his Slytherin friends in the last few months, though with all he had to deal with, it simply couldn't be helped.

As they were walking, Harry noticed Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle glance around furtively as they slipped away from the main group and walked behind a building. Harry told his friends he'd catch up before he slipped away and made himself invisible to see what the blond boy was up to. As he came around the building, he saw a very familiar scene: three Slytherin students standing over a Hufflepuff girl he recognized as Hannah Abbot.

"So mudblood," Malfoy said with an evil smirk. "Lost your friends, have you?"

"L-Leave me alone," the blond girl stammered, looking around wildly.

"Oh, I don't think so," Malfoy said casually. "You didn't think you could get away with it, did you? Potter knows what you've been saying about him." He grinned. "And that's bad for you."

"I never said anything!" Hannah said frantically. "I've never done anything to Potter!"

"That's not what he said," Malfoy said with a smirk as he raised his wand. He was about to curse the helpless girl, but two loud crashes broke his concentration, and he turned to see both Crabbe and Goyle lying unconscious against the side of the building. He spun around to face their attacker, but was thrown back as a disarming charm hit him. Looking up from where he'd landed, his eyes landed on one very angry Harry Potter.

"Don't move," Harry snapped as Hannah started to get up. He turned his gaze back to Malfoy. "So, this is your little game, then. You gang up on other students and tell them I made you do it. Fracta." The bone-breaking hex caught Malfoy in the arm, and he screamed. Harry watched him dispassionately before turning back to Abbott. "I didn't tell him to do this. In fact, I've never told him to do anything. I'm not

the leader of Slytherin, and I have no desire to be. Maybe now you'll believe me."

Hannah was looking at Harry with wide-eyes, and could only nod dumbly.

"Y-You, you're not with them?" She finally managed to squeak.

"No, I'm not with them, and they're not with me," Harry replied as he hit Malfoy with stinging hex and banished him into the wall again. "In fact, if any of the Slytherins pick on you again, you tell me, and I'll deal with it." Harry's eyes narrowed. "Painfully. Fracta." This time it was Malfoy's left leg that shattered, and he writhed in pain for a moment before Harry finally stunned him. He turned to see Hannah looking at him fearfully.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said with a sigh. "Go back to your housemates and tell them what happened. Tell them the truth. Understand?" Hannah nodded slowly and backed away. Harry threw one more disgusted look at Malfoy and his group before he enervated Crabbe and Goyle and threw them back their wands.

"He'll need to get to the hospital wing," Harry said casually as he walked off. He smirked when he heard one of the goons enervate Malfoy, who immediately screamed to be stunned again. As Harry made his way back to the high street, he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. When he turned his gaze to see what had caused it, he stopped dead.

Standing not twenty feet away from him, partially hidden by the underbrush, was a quite large, very shaggy, and very black dog.

A/N Ok, that is definitely the longest chapter to date. I thought about ending it a couple of other places, but this seemed fitting.

Next chapter will have a lot more action than this chapter, including Sirius, Dementors, and Fudge, Oh my

As always, comments are appreciated, and thanks for reading!

Standing not twenty feet away from him, partially hidden by the underbrush, was a quite large, very shaggy, and very black dog.

Forcing himself to remain calm, Harry started walking very slowly toward the animal as it cowered in the bushes.

“What’s the matter, boy?” He asked as nicely as he could. “It’s ok, I won’t hurt you.”

The dog whined and poked its head out cautiously as Harry approached. When he was finally within arms reach, Harry put his hand out and slowly stroked the dogs head. When it began to relax, Harry hit it with a wandless stunner and immediately made it invisible before levitating it as he walked quickly through the forest, glancing around to make sure no one had seen. When he was a sufficient distance from the nearest buildings, he found a spot that was secluded by a large hill and set the dog down before he took a step back and surveyed the ground before him. Concentrating hard, he began to cast a spell called the wall of illusion that he had come across in the Hogwarts library. When cast correctly, the spell would prevent anyone from seeing what was actually behind the wall; only allowing them to see what Harry wanted.

When he was satisfied with his spell, he stepped back inside and added a silencing charm before turning to the unconscious dog in front of him and muttering a spell. The dog began to morph slowly back into a man with shaggy black hair and torn clothing. Harry looked at man in disgust for a moment before he summoned a number of large branches and used a series of engorgement charms and transfiguration spells to bind his arms and legs. He checked the man carefully for a wand and, finding none, he hit him with a foot-freezing curse before enervating him.

“Uhh,” the man groaned as he slowly opened his eyes.

“Hello, Black,” Harry said coldly, causing the man’s eyes to snap open.

“Wha- H-Harry? Is it really you?” Sirius Black asked disbelievingly. “You really do look just like James,” he said softly. “I-

“Don’t act like you know me, traitor!” Harry spat angrily. “Fracta!” Black yelled in pain as his right arm shattered.

“H-H-Harry, stop,” he rasped. “I’m...not...the traitor.”

“Oh really?” Harry asked sarcastically. “Well then,” he flicked his wand and Black’s gaze snapped up to meet Harry’s. “Let’s see, shall we?”

Harry entered the man’s mind so forcefully that Black screamed. It was obvious almost immediately that Azkaban had all but destroyed whatever mental defenses he once had, and Harry found it almost impossible to navigate through Black’s errant thoughts, even with his full legilimency assault.

“Are you the traitor?” He hissed as he searched. Black whimpered, but was unable to form a response. However, he didn’t need to.

Harry followed Black’s thoughts when he’d said the word “traitor,” and found the memory he was looking for. He watched as Hagrid told Sirius that James and Lily were dead, he felt the anguish that Sirius had felt, and then the rage. He watched as Sirius confronted Pettigrew, only to have him cut off his own finger and turn into a rat. He felt the hopeless despair that Sirius had felt in Azkaban, and how he felt that he’d failed James and Lily...how he’d failed Harry.

Having seen enough, Harry hastily withdrew from Sirius’s mind and looked at him with a mixture of regret and anger. Harry’s mental assault had not been gentle, and Sirius was shaking uncontrollably and muttering to himself, oblivious to the fact that blood was leaking out of his nose and ears. Harry used his limited knowledge of healing charms to repair the arm he’d broken and stop the bleeding, but it was a temporary fix at best. Swearing to himself, Harry considered his options and came to a decision. He removed a chain from around his neck and placed it so that it was touching both his and Sirius’s hands.

“Activate,” he said, tapping the chain with his wand. Immediately, he felt a tug behind his navel followed by the rushing sensation of

portkey travel before he landed in a cozy living room. He levitated Sirius into the nearest bedroom and cleaned him up before pulling two potions from a nearby cabinet and forcing them down the man's throat. That done, he placed him gently under the covers and grabbed a quill and parchment to scribble a quick note.

Sirius Black –

I know you are innocent. I apologize for attacking you earlier, but I was told that it was you who had betrayed my parents, not Pettigrew. I have brought you to a house that very few people know about, and you will be safe here as long as you do not leave. DO NOT LEAVE. There is enough food to last several months in the basements under preservation charms, so feel free to help yourself to anything you want. I will be back as soon as I can to speak with you. Until then, DO NOT LEAVE THE HOUSE.

-Harry Potter

Harry scowled as he read over the note. It wasn't much, but it would have to do. He copied the note and left one next to the bed and one on the door. With one last look at his new houseguest, Harry turned and sprinted from the house until he reached the edge of the anti-apparition wards before apparating back to Hogsmede.

"Where the hell did you go?" Tracey demanded when he finally met her and Blaise at the Three Broomsticks. "We're already done here."

"Sorry," Harry apologized. "But I saw something suspicious and went to investigate. On the bright side, I finally found out what's been going on with the Hufflepuffs." Both Blaise and Tracey looked very interested at that, and he related what had happened with Malfoy earlier.

"I told you he was a slow learner," Blaise smirked when Harry had finished.

"So they've been attacking kids in your name the entire time?" Tracey asked incredulously. "How did we not hear about this?"

"I really don't know," Harry admitted. "In hindsight, I should have guessed something like this was happening. Some of the Gryffindors alluded to it, they even said Sprout knew. I wish somebody would have just told me what was happening," he said, annoyed.

"Do you think Dumbledore knew?"

"Now that is a good question," Harry said, looking thoughtful. "But I don't think so. He was the one that was so anxious to get me all friendly with the other houses, and this did the exact opposite." He paused. "No, if he knew, he would have tried to stop it. Or, at the very least, he would have tried to get me to stop it."

"That makes sense," Blaise said thoughtfully. "Still, it just doesn't seem like Malfoy's style, does it?"

"You're right, I thought the same thing," Harry replied. "But I saw it with my own two eyes, so it was definitely him."

Blaise frowned slightly, but said nothing, and the three left the restaurant to explore the rest of Hogsmede.

Later that night, after everyone else was asleep, Harry slipped out of the castle and apparated outside the wards to his safe house before making his way inside.

"Who's there?" Rasped a voice from the direction of the kitchen.

"It's Harry."

There was a slight pause, then:

"Harry?"

Sirius Black came around the corner from the kitchen looking much better than Harry had left him, but still far from healthy. His clothes were still in tatters and he was rubbing his eyes tiredly, as if trying to make sure he wasn't seeing an illusion.

"Harry," he sniffed, barreling forward with open arms.

Alarmed by the sudden movement, Harry sidestepped to the right, simultaneously extending his left foot and sending Sirius crashing to the floor. Sirius groaned and looked up at Harry with a hurt expression.

“What was that for?” He gasped out.

“What the hell was that?” Harry snapped. “I haven’t said a word and you tried to tackle me. Explain yourself!”

Sirius eyed him incredulously for a moment before his look turned to sadness.

“I was trying to give you a hug,” Sirius said softly. “Harry, what’s happened to you?”

“I don’t like sudden movements,” Harry replied as he slowly held out his hand to help the older man up. “Don’t do that again.”

“Ok, I’ll go slow. I’m going to hug you now.” Sirius said, stepping forward slowly. He reached his arms out and slowly engulfed Harry in a hug. Harry tensed and wasn’t sure how to reply to that, but the man was obviously no threat so he just stood there awkwardly. Finally, Sirius released him and stepped back to wipe his eyes.

“I thought I’d never see you again,” he said tearfully, then he chuckled. “You probably think I’m nutters.”

“I’m sure you’re still recovering, Mr. Black,” Harry replied simply. “And some of that is my fault. Can you think of anything you need that isn’t already here?”

“Well, for starters you can call me Sirius. I don’t know how much you know about me...” He trailed off.

“I know that you’re my godfather,” Harry answered immediately. “And that you were supposedly my parents’ secret keeper and betrayed them to Voldemort. I also know that Pettigrew was the real secret keeper, and that he faked his own death to frame you.”

Sirius whistled. "You know a lot," he said when Harry had finished. "How did you know I'm innocent?"

Harry frowned.

"Do you remember what happened when I found you?"

"Not really," Sirius said, shaking his head. "I remember being in my animagus form and you coming over, and then I remember you woke me up in the forest and...hey, you broke my arm!"

"Yeah, I thought you were guilty," Harry replied with a shrug. "I tried to fix it after I found out the truth. How is it now?"

"Actually it's not bad," Sirius said, flexing his arm slightly. "That was good spell work, how did you know it was me?"

"Professor Lupin told me about your animagus form, that's how I recognized you."

"Moony told you?" Sirius asked in astonishment. "Did he say anything...else?"

"He told me about your days in Hogwarts together," Harry replied. "And about the marauders. Do you want me to tell him about you? I think he's one of the few that would believe your story."

"Really?" Sirius looked hopeful at that before throwing a suspicious look at Harry. "You never did answer my question. How did you know I was innocent?"

"It was after I broke your arm, do you remember?" Harry asked carefully.

"I just remember an incredible pain, like someone was tearing my brain out." Sirius said with a shudder. "What did you do to me?"

"I used a complicated memory spell," Harry lied smoothly. "I'm sorry about that, too, I know it's mentally draining and incredibly painful, but

it was the only way for me to know if you were telling the truth. That's how I found out about your innocence."

"So that's why I can't seem to concentrate on anything?"

"Most likely," Harry agreed. "Although, I would guess that some of that is from all the time you spent around the dementors when you were in Azkaban."

Sirius shuddered heavily at the mention of the dementors, and for a moment it looked like he'd forgotten where he was.

"Sirius? SIRIUS!" Harry said loudly, shaking the man out of his stupor.

"Wha-, oh," he shook his head. "Sorry, I lost it for a second there."

"It's ok. Look, I have to get back to Hogwarts soon so I don't get caught. You got my note, obviously?" Sirius nodded. "Well, I'd suggest that you stay here until you've regained your strength, then we can decide who else we should tell about your innocence and how to find Pettigrew."

"PETTIGREW!" Sirius yelled, eyes flashing. "I almost forgot! He's at Hogwarts! We have to get him, Harry! We have to-"

"Stop!" Harry snapped, cutting the man off. "You need to calm down, Sirius, deep breaths." Slowly, the wild look in Sirius's eyes receded, and Harry continued. "Now, I want you to answer, but stay calm, ok? What do you mean Pettigrew is at Hogwarts?"

"Pettigrew is an animagus, same as me," Sirius said slowly, fighting to stay calm. "His form is rat, and he's been living with the Weasleys as a pet. Ron Weasley has Peter Pettigrew in his room right now, and he has no idea!"

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment.

"Of course," he finally exclaimed. "That's why you tried to break into Gryffindor instead of Slytherin! Everybody thought you were after me,

so that didn't make any sense, but you were really after Weasley's rat!" Harry looked up to see a rather miserable look on Sirius's face. "What?"

"So you're really a Slytherin?"

Harry nodded bemusedly and pointed to the crest on his Hogwarts robes, which Sirius had apparently failed to notice.

"It was all over the papers," Harry said. "You didn't know?"

"I heard, but I hoped it wasn't true," Sirius admitted. He gave Harry a searching look. "Why?"

"I really don't have time to tell you right now," Harry said, getting to his feet. "I have to get back to Hogwarts before I'm missed. Try to get some sleep. I'll be back tomorrow as soon as I can."

"Ok...wait, how do you get back and forth? For that matter, where am I?"

"Don't worry about that right now," Harry replied with a shake of his head. "Focus on getting stronger, and I'll see what I can do about Pettigrew. Is there anybody at Hogwarts you want me to bring here? You have to be sure they'll believe you, maybe Remus?"

"Moony? I don't know," Sirius frowned. "He thinks I'm a traitor, and so does everybody else."

"In that case, we'll wait until we find Pettigrew," Harry said firmly. "Try to get some rest. Actually, I don't know if you've ever studied occlumency, but you might want to try meditating to clear your mind; it's been battered pretty hard."

"I studied occlumency when I was younger," Sirius said. "Most pure-blood families do, and the Blacks were nothing if not traditional." He snorted.

Harry was surprised at how bitter the man sounded, but let it go.

“Until tomorrow then.”

“Until then.” Sirius gave Harry another awkward hug before releasing him, and Harry walked back outside the wards and returned to the castle.

Harry awoke early Sunday morning, already planning how he would approach his new set of problems. At breakfast, he waited until he saw Hermione get up to leave before pulling her aside as she left the Great Hall and throwing a silencing charm around them.

“Hermione, I need to ask you a very strange question, and I need you to trust me on something. Can you do that?”

Hermione looked confused for a moment before squaring her shoulders in determination.

“I trust you, Harry. What is it?”

“Ok, does Ron Weasley have a pet rat?”

“Uh, yeah, he does,” that certainly wasn’t what she was expecting. “Or at least, he did. He lost it last week.” Harry groaned in frustration. “Why do you ask, Harry?”

“I can’t tell you yet, but trust me, it’s important,” he said, eyeing the girl earnestly. “You can’t tell anybody else about this, Hermione. It’s very, very important that you tell me if Ron finds that rat, ok? Don’t tell anybody else we even had this conversation, not even Row.”

“Ok Harry, if it’s that important, I won’t tell anybody. I promise.”

“Thank you Hermione,” Harry said earnestly. “I promise I’ll tell you what this is about as soon as I can.”

Hermione gave him a small smile that Harry returned and the two started towards their respective common rooms.

“Hey, Potter!” Harry turned to see Cedric Diggory coming up to him with Hannah Abbott and several other Hufflepuffs following.

“What?” Harry asked, eyeing the group carefully.

Cedric took a deep breath. “We want to apologize,” he said bravely. “Hannah told us what happened in Hogsmede yesterday with Malfoy, and I wanted to say that I’m sorry for not talking to you before.”

Harry looked at the group of Hufflepuffs cowering behind him and frowned. There were murmurs of agreement, but many of them still looked at him with more than a little fear.

“I accept your apology,” Harry said flatly. “But until the rest of you,” he looked at the group behind Cedric, “can learn to look at me without cringing, I don’t think it’s going to matter much.” There was more scattered muttering from the group, and Harry saw a couple of boys in the back that apparently didn’t care much for Cedric’s apology.

“Was there something else?” Harry asked, looking back at Cedric.

“Uh, not really,” Cedric said, confused. He’d expected Harry to show at least some emotion, especially after Cedric had tried to get him to take veritaserum. Hell, even anger would have been better than the cool dismissal he’d just shown to the group.

“We really are sorry, Harry.” Hannah Abbott said, stepping up next to Cedric. Harry could see she was so nervous that her hands were shaking. “A-And I never really g-got a chance to t-thank you for yesterday, so...thank you.”

Harry shrugged dismissively. “I’m just glad everything got cleared up,” he said. “Next time if you want to know something, ask me first.” With that, he turned and followed Hermione down the hall, leaving a very confused group of Hufflepuffs behind him.

“He said the apology was accepted, but it sure doesn’t feel like it, does it?” Somebody in the group asked when Harry was out of sight.

"I don't why we're apologizing in the first place," said another angrily. "Maybe he wasn't planning the attacks, but that doesn't mean we can trust him."

"And that's why he doesn't trust any of us," Hannah said sadly.

"I don't mean to sound petty," Ernie Macmillan said slowly. "But he's still a Slytherin, no matter what else he says, and like it or not, the Prophet had a point. Maybe we should just leave it alone."

"That's not good enough for me," Cedric said firmly. "I'm going to talk to Sprout, who's with me?"

There was a lot of shuffling as some students looked at the floor, and in the end only Hannah Abbott and two others stood beside Cedric, who looked at the rest of the group sadly, most of whom refused to meet his eyes.

"Let's go," he said softly. With that, he turned and led the way to Sprout's office.

While the Hufflepuffs were on their way to talk to their head of house, Harry once again slipped off the Hogwarts grounds and apparated outside the wards of the plan B house to meet Sirius.

"Sirius?" He called as he entered. "Sirius? Are you here?"

"In here," Sirius called from the living room. Harry entered to find him lounging in front of the television with an impressive breakfast spread laid out around him. "Hungry?"

"Just ate. How do you feel?"

"Better," Sirius admitted. "I tried some occlumency exercises like you suggested and it helped loads. My head is still a little fuzzy, but I've got at least some control now."

"Well, you can't expect to erase a decade of abuse in one night," Harry said wisely. "At least you have some time to get better;

Pettigrew ran away from Weasley last week and nobody knows where he is."

"WHAT? DAMN!" Sirius exclaimed, pounding his fist against the couch. "I was so close, too!" He slumped dejectedly. "Now we'll never find him."

"We don't know that," Harry replied, ignoring the outburst. "And you need time to recuperate anyway. If he comes back to Weasley, I'll know immediately. In the mean time, you get better and I get ready in case he shows up."

"Harry, you can't take him by yourself," Sirius said warningly. "He's a fully trained wizard, and sneaky to boot. If you find him, promise me you'll come get me first."

"Absolutely not," Harry said, shaking his head. "It's too risky for you to come back to Hogwarts. Besides, if everything works out, he'll be in his animagus form when I get him, so I won't actually have to fight him."

"Dammit Harry," Sirius snarled. "He destroyed my life! Your parents switched secret keepers because I suggested it! Don't you see? He's my responsibility!"

"I don't care," Harry said coldly. "What's important is that he gets caught and you get free; everything else is secondary." He fixed Sirius with a serious glare.

"I'm your godfather-" Sirius began.

"Godfather or not," Harry interrupted sharply. "You are not in charge here; remember that." Sirius's face slowly changed from anger to shock as he regarded the young man before him. "I understand this is hard for you to deal with," Harry continued in a warmer tone. "But what you have to understand is that I'm in a much better position to deal with Pettigrew than you are. I understand that you want revenge, and you deserve it, but if you kill him, nobody will ever know the truth."

Sirius seemed to be struggling with himself before sighing dejectedly.

“How’d you get so smart?” He muttered.

“Your emotions are still raw and hard to control,” Harry replied. “Mine aren’t.”

“I need to at least see him before you turn him in,” Sirius said pleadingly. “He killed the man I loved like a brother and sent me to hell on earth for 12 years, Harry. I can’t just let him go.”

Harry frowned. “I’ll think about it, but only if you can control yourself. We’d have to find someplace to do it, too, since I don’t really fancy bringing him here.”

“How about the Shrieking Shack?” Sirius asked.

“What about it?”

“There a tunnel that leads from the Hogwarts grounds directly into it. We used to use it all the time during the full moon.”

“Is there really?” Harry asked thoughtfully. “That’s certainly interesting. Are there any other secret passages that you know about?”

“You mean you don’t know any?” Sirius said, aghast. “There’s loads, and not just secret passages either. Hogwarts is full of secrets if you know where to look. Let me see....”

Sirius spent the next couple of hours telling Harry all the secrets that he could remember from his days as a marauder, along with quite a few stories regaling his many exploits. As he talked, Harry couldn’t help but be reminded of Jack, especially the way Sirius would laugh when recalling a particularly funny look on someone’s face. Harry was especially interested to learn that Lupin had somewhat understated the enmity between the marauders and Snape. According to the Sirius, both he and Harry’s father had absolutely hated Snape, which shed new light on the potion master’s attitude towards him.

“Wait, you did what, exactly?”

“We turned him into our own private portrait,” Sirius said, grinning. “Snape never came anywhere near our common room, so when we saw him, we knew he was up to something. We stunned him before he even saw us, and James had the idea to stick him over the portrait of the fat lady so that he would swing as she opened and closed for students. It was actually Peter who figured out how to make him give the password.”

“How did you do that?”

“It’s easier than it sounds, actually,” Sirius admitted. “We used a conditional sticking charm; the type that usually had a password to release it. We just made the password the phrase ‘Gryffindor Pride,’ which was the password to the common room, but we made it so that the phrase had to be said 20 times by the same person. Of course, we didn’t tell Snape,” he laughed. “We left him a note that said he had to say it until every Gryffindor student had passed by, and that if he said anything else, he’d be stuck there indefinitely. He sat there, stuck to the portrait, and every time a student approached he had to say ‘Gryffindor Pride,’ then he got swung around as the portrait opened!” Sirius roared with laughter, and even Harry managed a chuckle at that. Of course, when he remembered that this was most likely the reason that Snape was trying to take Row away, he immediately sobered.

“Why didn’t he just wait for the Professors?”

“He did, at first,” Sirius replied, still chuckling. “But Dumbledore was off on some sort of business, and Slughorn, that was the head of Slytherin house, he wasn’t much with a wand. McGonagall tried too, but she couldn’t dispel it either,” Sirius said with a grin.

“Ok, I give up. Why couldn’t they dispel your sticking charm?”

“We were too sneaky, that’s why,” Sirius replied. “We didn’t stick him directly to the portrait; we stuck him to a thin plank of wood that James had transfigured, and then we stuck the wood to the portrait. So when the professors tried to dispel the charm...”

"They ignored the wood in their focus, and the charm didn't work," Harry finished for him, impressed. "I assume you disillusioned the wood?"

"Of course."

"Impressive," Harry admitted. "How did you manage to get away with that?"

"We didn't," Sirius responded wryly. "A month of detention each for that one. It would have been more, but they didn't have any hard evidence. Of course, it ended up being more like 2 months anyway, but that's a different story." He paused for a moment. "Oh, those were the days," he said with a sigh as he wiped his eyes. "So tell me Harry," he said conspiratorially. "Thinking about re-using one of our old pranks?"

"Maybe," Harry admitted. "I'm just trying to decide if it would work."

"Who's the target?"

"You saw me fighting against those other Slytherins yesterday, right?"

"I meant to ask you about that," Sirius exclaimed. "Who were they?"

"Draco Malfoy and his goons," Harry replied. "Basically, they've been going around beating up younger students and telling them that I was giving the orders. Did you see what the Prophet was printing about me being the next dark lord?"

"Uh, yeah," Sirius said uneasily. "Wait, Malfoy? Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy's son?"

"That's the one," Harry replied. "In fact, it was actually Malfoy Sr. who spread all those lies in the paper about me because I knocked little Draco around. Well, apparently Malfoy Jr. decided to use that to his advantage, and the students he attacked were already so scared of me that everybody just assumed it was true. I've already had to teach

Malfoy a lesson more than once, but apparently he isn't learning, so I'm looking for alternatives."

"Alternatives to what?"

"My other plan," Harry replied cryptically. "In any case, it wouldn't work for me because I'm not a Gryffindor."

"You could get one of them to help you," Sirius suggested hopefully.

"Not likely," Harry snorted. "There were a lot of rumors involving them, too, and they're not too fond of me. Besides, it was the Hufflepuffs he was attacking."

"I still can't believe you're a Slytherin," Sirius muttered. "How did it happen? Will you tell me?"

"All I can say is that Slytherin is the best place for me right now," Harry said firmly. "It's true that the hat considered Gryffindor as well, but in the end Slytherin was the best choice."

"I didn't mean to sound accusing, Harry," Sirius said quickly. "It's fine that you're in Slytherin. It's just that, well, my family expected me to go into Slytherin, and when I didn't, they basically disowned me. My brother and most of my cousins ended up there, and almost all of them joined Voldemort. That's why Slytherins tend to rub me the wrong way."

"You don't have to apologize," Harry said. "Most of them rub me the wrong way too, but it can't be helped."

Sirius looked like he desperately wanted to ask another question, but managed to stay silent.

"How long can you stay?" He finally asked.

"Not long," Harry answered. "In fact, I should probably be heading back, just to be safe. But before I go, I want to give you this." Harry pulled a notepad out of his pocket and handed it to Sirius. "It's a way

for us to communicate. Everything you write in here will appear on an identical notepad that I have; we call them messengers.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen these before,” Sirius said, turning the notepad over in his hands. He looked back at Harry with a twinkle in his eye. “Aren’t these against Hogwarts rules?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t care much for rules.”

Sirius laughed approvingly.

“Anyway,” Harry continued. “I have the only messenger that’s tied to yours, so nobody else will know until I tell them. If anything happens with Pettigrew, I’ll let you know.”

“Ok,” Sirius said, pocketing the messenger. “Oh, and Harry?” Harry turned around and Sirius smiled. “Thanks.”

Harry just nodded back before he turned and walked to the edge of the wards. When he was there, he placed a wandless glamour on his face and apparated to Knockturn Alley. He had a few stops to make before he returned to the castle.

When Harry finally returned to Hogwarts it was mid-afternoon, and he immediately sought out Row. As usual, he found in the library with Hermione and Padma.

“Where’s Sarah?” Harry asked as he approached them.

“Said she had to send an owl,” Row replied, looking up. “Where have you been?”

“Just doing some practice,” Harry said, shooting her a look that said he’d explain later.

“We heard about what Malfoy was doing,” Padma said quietly. “Sorry, Harry.”

“Not your fault,” Harry replied kindly. “Not even Blaise knew, so I can’t really be upset that you guys didn’t.”

“I heard the Hufflepuffs apologized, though,” Row said. “That’s good, right?”

“If it means they’ll leave me alone now, it’s great,” Harry snorted. “What are the chances of that happening?”

“About the same as the chances of you not being approached by Dumbledore right now,” Row said, looking behind him. Stifling a groan, Harry turned to see Dumbledore walking towards him through the library.

“Good afternoon, Harry, ladies,” Dumbledore said as he approached. “Harry, Professor Sprout has requested a meeting with you as soon as possible, preferably tomorrow. Since we agreed that you would have at least a week’s notice, I told her I would ask, but I could not guarantee anything.”

Harry stifled another groan and thought about the offer. It was either meet soon or meet later, and he had other things to take care of later.

“If she wants, I’ll meet her tonight,” Harry told the headmaster. “After dinner?”

“She will be happy to hear that,” Dumbledore said, twinkling.

“I’m sure she will,” Harry muttered. He leaned forward. “Is there any news about the Macmillan meeting?” He asked in a low voice.

“I’m afraid that Mr. Macmillan appears to be reluctant to meet with you,” Dumbledore replied, his twinkle dimming slightly. “I do not know why, but perhaps it would be best if you consider the three options you already have.”

Harry looked at Dumbledore quizzically, but nodded, and the headmaster left the group to its studying.

“Why were you supposed to meet with the Macmillans?” Padma asked when Harry returned to the group. When Harry looked at her sharply, she blushed. “I was, er, listening.”

“It’s personal,” Harry said flatly. “And it’s very important that you don’t mention it to anyone else. It’s a very private family matter.”

“I promise we’ll tell you when we can,” Row put in. “But Harry’s right, it’s really important that you not talk about it now.”

Hermione threw an odd look at Harry, no doubt wondering if this situation was related to his question about Ron’s rat, but held her tongue. Both girls agreed to keep the conversation private, and the group went back to studying.

Later that night, Harry once again found himself in an empty classroom facing Professor Sprout and the Hufflepuffs.

“Mr. Potter, I know you have already heard this from my students, but I wanted you to hear it from me,” Sprout began. “I’m sorry I misjudged you, Mr. Potter, and I’m sorry for the way I treat you the last time we met.”

“As I told your students, your apologies are accepted,” Harry said evenly. “I’m not angry at you, and I don’t wish you ill. But if you expect me to suddenly become friendly, you’re going to be disappointed.”

“Harry, I know you feel like you can’t trust us, and you’re right to think that,” Cedric broke in. “But we really want to make it up to you, so there’s anything we can help you with, just ask.”

“Well, then,” Sprout said awkwardly when Harry remained silent. “I believe I have some punishment to take care of, if you’ll excuse me, Mr. Potter.” Sprout left the room, leaving Harry with Cedric, Hannah, and 3 other Hufflepuffs, two boys and one girl, whose names he didn’t know.

“So, why do they make you do this, anyway?” One of the other boys asked. “I’ve never heard of anything like it before.”

"I don't know, really," Harry replied. "Dumbledore set the rules himself, though, so it's not a standard punishment."

"I heard that you refused to do normal detention so they came up with this," the other unknown boy said.

"Still listening to rumors, are you?" Harry said sarcastically. The boy paled and began to stammer.

Harry just shook his head in exasperation before turning back to Cedric. "Is there something else we're here for?"

"Not really," Cedric said with a sigh.

"I'll be leaving then," Harry said as he got up.

"I really wish you'd talk to us, Harry." Cedric said as the other students slowly filed out. "I meant what I said, if there's anything I can do, just ask."

Harry stopped suddenly and turned back to regard the other boy with a curious gleam in his eye.

"Anything?"

That Thursday after dinner, Harry walked casually through the halls of Hogwarts.

"Harry, where have you been? You have to see this!" Row said, running towards him as he rounded a corner. "It's Malfoy, he-" She stopped abruptly when Cedric came around the corner just after Harry. "Oh, uh, hi Cedric," Row said shyly.

"What's all this then?" Cedric asked, noticing a large crowd of people walking in the direction of the Hufflepuff common room.

"Huh? Oh!" Row exclaimed, regaining her train of thought. "It's the door to your common room, you have to see this!" Harry and Cedric

schooled their faces and followed the excited girl through the throng of people until they could view the scene in front of the Hufflepuff common room. It was a scene that would not soon be forgotten.

The door to the Hufflepuff common room was a flat stretch of stone wall set in between two identical suits of armor. Standing next to the suits on either side of the wall were Crabbe and Goyle, both bowing formally and obviously frozen in place.

In between them, stuck spread eagled to the blank stretch of wall, was Draco Malfoy. The blond boy was struggling desperately against whatever spell was holding him, only to discover that his arms legs back, and even his neck and head had been stuck securely to the wall behind him. As the crowd grew, he went from looking angry to looking trapped and ashamed at the situation he found himself in. As Harry got closer, he could see a set of written instructions that were floating in front of the blond boy's face.

"Well Malfoy?" An older Hufflepuff said impatiently. "Are you going to let us in, or just sit there all day."

"You can bloody well wait!" Malfoy snarled. "Professor Snape will be here soon, and then you'll regret ever touching me!"

"What is going on here?" Came the voice of Professor Sprout as she approached the large crowd. "Is the password not wor- WHAT IS THIS!"

"Please, Professor," a seventh year girl said. "It was like this when we came back from dinner. There's a note that says the password to the common room has been changed to 'I'm sorry,' and that Malfoy has to say it to every Hufflepuff student before the sticking charm will wear off."

Professor Sprout nearly fell over in shock as she read the parchment floating in front of the bound Slytherins. "Who is responsible for this?" She asked the crowd. There was a lot of shuffling and more than a few furtive glances, but nobody spoke. "Well, they'll be time for that later, I guess. Try to remain calm, Mr. Malfoy, I shall fetch the other professors."

“Fetch us for what?” Professor McGonagall asked, emerging from the crowd with Professors Snape and Flitwick. “Oh my word! What happened?”

“I don’t know, I’m afraid,” Sprout admitted. “This is the only thing I found.” She handed McGonagall the parchment with the instructions on it. McGonagall gave a fierce frown, but Harry could have sworn that her lips had turned upwards first.

Snape, however, had a very different reaction. When he saw Malfoy, he instantly paled and began to look around frantically. Suddenly he stopped and whipped his head to find Harry, who was watching the scene with a neutral expression.

“POTTER!” He roared, advancing on Harry. “DID YOU THINK I WOULDN’T REMEMBER! DO YOU THINK IT’S FUNNY?”

“Severus,” McGonagall cried, shocked. “Mr. Potter has been in one of the third floor classrooms all day. I myself saw him and Mr. Diggory practicing there earlier.”

“Cedric informed me of that, as well,” Sprout spoke up. “Surely you don’t think this was Mr. Potter’s doing? He’s one of yours!”

“He’ll never be one of mine,” Snape snarled. “I know you’re behind this, Potter, and you’ll pay like your father never did.”

“Severus, that is enough,” McGonagall said firmly. “I admit that the similarities are...remarkable. But Mr. Potter could not have done this.” Snape continued to glare murderously at Harry, but ceased his ranting, and McGonagall continued. “Now, since the headmaster is spending the day at the Ministry, it falls to us to remove whatever is keeping these boys in place. Professor, if you would?” She motioned to Flitwick, who stepped up and began to cast charms aimed at dispelling various enchantments.

Twenty minutes later, both Crabbe and Goyle had been freed, but there had been no progress on Malfoy. McGonagall and Flitwick were both shaking their heads in confusion, and Snape was fuming.

"I'm afraid there's nothing for it," Flitwick finally said. "He'll have to apologize to the students and hope that the pranksters are true to their word."

"He will do nothing of the kind," Snape snarled. "If Potter's not behind this, then he knows who is. IT'S THE SAME SPELL!"

"Severus," McGonagall hissed. "I understand this is trying for you but you must control your temper in front of the students. Now, as I recall, the spell did indeed lift the last time, so there's no reason to believe that it won't this time as well. I do not know when the headmaster will return, and the Hufflepuffs must be allowed access to their common room. We will have to follow these instructions."

"I'll have no part of this," Snape spat angrily as he turned and walked furiously through the crowd of students.

"Mr. Malfoy, I'm afraid that you will have to follow the instructions you were given. We cannot afford to wait for the headmaster, and whatever spell this is, it is beyond our talents to reverse."

"W-What?" Malfoy stammered incredulously before flushing. "You mean I actually have to apologize to this, this, filth?"

"Mr. Malfoy!" McGonagall exclaimed. "That is quite enough! Now, I suggest you get on with it, or we'll be here all night!"

Malfoy bit back his retort and glared at the Hufflepuffs murderously. His mouth opened and closed soundlessly for a moment and he had to take a deep breath.

"I'm sorry," he finally bit out. As expected, the door to the Hufflepuff common room began to open, but unlike the Gryffindor portrait, it didn't open out. Instead, the entire section of wall reclined backwards, like a reverse drawbridge, leaving Malfoy splayed out on what was now the floor of the entrance into the room.

"Ow!" He cried as the first Hufflepuff through stepped on his hand.

“Oh, was that your hand?” The girl asked with mock concern. “I’m so sorry!”

“That’s quite enough, Miss Blake,” McGonagall snapped. “The next person who tries that will serve detention with me. Now, form a line.”

One by one, the Hufflepuffs stepped up to Malfoy and watched as he apologized before stepping over him into their common room. After the first ten students had passed and Malfoy began to look less angry and more humiliated, there were scattered guffaws in the Hufflepuff line. Of course, in most of the students’ minds, Malfoy was only getting what he deserved.

When the 25th student approached and Malfoy said “I’m sorry” one more time, the blond boy abruptly fell to the ground just as the door began to open. It took him a moment to realize he was free, but when he did he immediately ran as fast as he could back towards the Slytherin dungeons, the remaining students’ laughter ringing in his ears.

“Well, it would appear that the pranksters were true to their word, after all,” McGonagall said, turning to Professor Flitwick.

“Yes, but I’m still most curious how a student was able to cast a charm that we could not break.”

“Yes, that is interesting, isn’t it?” McGonagall said thoughtfully, throwing an unreadable look at Harry.

Harry shrugged back at her and gave her an innocent look. Sighing, she shook her head and started back towards her office.

“Come on, Potter, I know you did it,” Blaise said quietly as they walked to lunch. “There’s no one else who could have, and you didn’t come to lunch that day.”

It had been a little over two weeks since the prank on Malfoy, and it was still a popular topic of conversation for the students. Malfoy

himself had been laying low, hoping in vain that the whole thing would blow over quickly. Instead, he'd been given a new nickname: doormat. The fact that the name referred to the Hufflepuff doormat only made it worse.

"I was practicing with Cedric Diggory, I told you."

Blaise snorted. "So, you just happened to be practicing with the same Hufflepuff prefect that admitted to changing the password for the prank on Malfoy, and you just happened to be practicing in an area where different Professors could see you from a distance, and you just happened to be so involved you forgot about lunch? Come on, Potter, I'm not stupid."

"You're not still on about this, are you?" Tracey asked as she joined them at the table. "Blaise, if he did it, I'm sure he'll tell you eventually. Won't you Harry?"

"There's nothing to tell," Harry said with a shrug.

"Bollocks."

"Such undignified language for a Zabini," Tracey joked. Blaise glared at her.

"The only thing I don't get," Tracey said, ignoring the glare. "Is how Diggory got off with only a month of detention. You'd think you get a suspension, at least."

"He had the same alibi as this one," Blaise said, jerking a thumb at Harry. "So they know that he wasn't the one who actually assaulted Malfoy; just an accomplice. Actually, I heard that they offered to let him off completely if he gave up the other people involved, but he refused. Pretty stupid if you ask me."

"Well, he is the star of Hufflepuff, loyalty to your friends and all that," Tracey reasoned.

"I think Blaise is more about loyalty to Blaise," Harry muttered. Tracey laughed.

"And proud of it, Potter," Blaise said with a smirk.

"Of course, his loyalty didn't save him from Snape," Tracey said. "I heard he's worse with him than he is with you, Harry."

"That's because Potter here has something on our head of house," Blaise said. "I don't know what it is, but it's definitely something."

"What do you mean?" Tracey asked, confused.

"He doesn't know what he's talking about," Harry muttered.

"Remember at the beginning of the year, how nasty Snape was to our friend here? Then, all of a sudden, he does from harassing him every chance he gets to completely ignoring him, overnight. I'll admit, lately he's been back to a little of his old form, but compared to what he does to Diggory, you have it light."

"Maybe," Harry said noncommittally. Tracey looked at him searchingly, but didn't say anything, and the three continued to eat in silence. Harry took this opportunity to go over what he needed to accomplish in the weeks ahead.

The first thing Harry had done when he learned that Pettigrew was missing was find a way to locate him. The answer had come to him almost immediately. After all, he was a parseltongue, and what better way to locate a rat animagus than with snakes?

After his second visit to Sirius, Harry had apparated to Knockturn Alley and purchased every snake with paralytic venom that he was able to have a civil conversation with. In the end, he'd come back to Hogwarts with 8 different snakes, all different breeds and sizes. Since then, his small army had been searching the Hogwarts grounds and the forbidden forest for any trace of Pettigrew, but had thus far come up empty.

He had visited Sirius at the plan B house as often as he could since then, and Harry found himself looking forward to the visits more and more each time. Sirius himself had improved quite a bit, and Harry

had managed to smuggle him an unregistered wand so that he could begin working with his magic. Sirius was even able to apparate again, although he could only manage small distances compared to what he could do before he went to Azkaban. Still, things were looking up, and Harry was happy for that.

The only problem from Harry's viewpoint was that as he got stronger, Sirius also became more fatherly towards him. More than once Harry had been forced to remind Sirius that he was a guest in Harry's home, under Harry's protection, and that Harry made the decisions. So far they had avoided a serious fight, but Harry could tell that it would come eventually. Thinking about it now, he sighed heavily. Why couldn't people see that he could take care of himself?

Harry put those feelings of frustration aside, and focused on feeling calm. After almost 6 months of exercises designed to increase his emotional control, Harry found that most negative emotions, like frustration and annoyance, could be pushed aside easily. In fact, his control was so good that even Lupin's more powerful nightmare ward hadn't kept Harry from casting his corporeal patronus, something that he was most proud of.

"Blaise and I are going to practice those cheering charms, want to come?" Tracey asked, bringing Harry's train of thought back to reality.

"Actually, I think I'm going to fly for a while," Harry replied.

Tracey frowned. "You're sure flying a lot lately. Thinking about trying out for the team next year?"

"Not really, I just enjoy it. Besides, it's Saturday."

"Well, I still think you should try out," Tracey continued. "You'd be much better than what we've got now. Anyway, have fun."

Harry said goodbye to the two of them before he pulled out his shrunken broom and walked to the Quidditch pitch. It was true that he had been flying a lot lately, but it was mostly because he used it as an excuse to confer with his snakes.

He took off quickly and flew a few quick loops, making sure that no one was watching him before he landed at the edge of the forbidden forest.

--Aero, are you here?-- He hissed towards the bushes. After a moment, the bushes moved slightly and a bright orange snake with scattered black stripes emerged.

--I am here, master-- the snake replied. --It is good you came, we have found him.--

--The rat?-- Harry hissed in excitement. --Where?--

--Serra has him closer to the castle. Come, I will take you. --

Harry had to use his focus to quell his excitement as he followed Aero along the edge of the forbidden forest. As they approached the side of the castle, the snake turned abruptly inwards, and Harry followed him, entering the forest completely. After a minute or so of walking, they came upon a pitch black snake that was wrapped around a rat possessively.

--You are sure this is the one, Serra?-- Harry hissed at the new snake.

--He is missing one toe, master. And his smell is not quite right. He is paralyzed, but only for a little while--

--Release him, Serra, I will bind him. --

--Yes master.--

As Serra slowly unwound herself from around the rat, Harry stunned and petrified it before summoning it to him. With a deep breath, he aimed his wand and cast the same spell he had used on Sirius in his dog form.

When the rat began to morph into a fat, balding man, all Harry's doubts were erased, and he immediately reversed the spell before stunning, petrifying, and binding the rat once more just to be safe. That done, he pulled out the messenger he shared with Sirius.

Sirius, are you there?

I'm here, something wrong?

I've got Pettigrew.

Really? You've got him? With you?

He's bound in rat form as we speak.

Bring him to the shack, I'll meet you there.

Sirius, that's not a good idea.

Harry waited for a response, but it didn't come.

Sirius? Sirius? Are you there?

"Shit," Harry swore softly. Obviously, Sirius was on his way, and he was probably going to apparate, which meant Harry could either meet him at the Shrieking Shack, or risk him doing something really stupid like coming into Hogwarts. Swearing to himself, Harry checked the bindings on Pettigrew and started back towards the castle, considering his options as he went.

If he took Pettigrew to Sirius in the Shrieking Shack, Sirius would probably beat him up, Harry would have to restrain him, and then he'd take Pettigrew to Dumbledore. On the other hand, if things got out of control, Sirius could kill him, or Pettigrew could escape. However, if he didn't take Pettigrew to the Shrieking Shack, Sirius would try to come in and find him, and was something Harry definitely didn't want. Of course, if he could find Dumbledore quickly, he could show him Pettigrew, tell him about Sirius, and then he could go meet Sirius in the Shrieking Shack. He frowned. For that plan to work, he would have to find Dumbledore quickly. He started to run as he entered the castle.

Harry was so lost in thought that he failed to notice when he passed a sandy blond boy on his way inside. When the boy ran off in the

opposite direction, Harry was already well past him, and didn't notice that either.

However, when he heard the sound of many students running from behind him, he stopped and spun around to see who it was.

"What are you doing with my rat, Potter? Give it back!" Ron Weasley yelled as the group approached.

"This isn't your rat, Weasley," Harry said, sounding bored. "It's-"

"Accio scabbers!" Shouted George Weasley. Harry's eyes widened as the rat slipped out of his hand, but only for a moment. With a thought, he summoned Pettigrew back to his hand, simultaneously sending a concussion hex into the middle of the group. Ron, Seamus, and the twins were thrown violently apart and Harry sprinted away towards Dumbledore's office, making himself invisible as he turned the corner.

"Where'd he go?" Seamus asked, regaining his feet.

"He ran, that bastard!" Ron snarled. "Now we'll never get him."

"What does he want with your rat anyway?"

"He's a snake, who knows?" Ron kicked the castle wall. "I can't believe we let him get away."

"Never fear, o brother mine," Fred said, pulling a piece of parchment from his back pocket.

"There's always a way," put in George.

"As long as you know where to look," said Fred with a smirk.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," they said together, touching their wands to the parchment in front of them.

"The marauder's map? What's that?" Asked Ron as writing began to appear on the parchment.

"This, dear brother, will tell us exactly where the ratnapper is headed."

"See, there he is, running towards Dumbledore's office," Fred looked thoughtful for a moment. "Here, there's a shortcut this way, we can head him off."

Fred quickly stowed the parchment and dashed off down the hallway, the rest of the group close behind.

When Harry finally reached the gargoyle guarding the headmaster's office, he was out of breath and he knew he was running out of time.

"I need to see the headmaster, it's urgent," he told the guard.

"The headmaster is not in," the gargoyle replied smugly. "You'll have to wait."

"I don't have time to wait!" Harry snarled. "I have-"

Harry abruptly spun around as the sound of running footsteps reached his ears.

Swearing to himself, he took off at a run back the way he came and headed towards the whomping willow. He would have to speak to Dumbledore later.

"Now.....where'd....he go?" Ron Weasley panted when he reached the corridor leading to the headmaster's office only to find it empty.

"Just....a minute," George huffed, pulling out the map. He started to search it for Harry Potter when his body abruptly tensed.

"What's wrong?" Fred asked immediately, concerned.

"L-Look," George stammered, holding the map out.

Fred took the map in his hand and followed George's finger, which was pointing to a rapidly moving dot labeled Harry Potter. However, it was the dot waiting for him at the edge of the map that forced the breath from Fred's lungs.

"Sirius Black," he whispered. "My god, he's running right towards Sirius Black."

"Sirius Black!" Both Ron and Seamus exclaimed, going white. "He's here?"

"We need to tell McGonagall, now!" George said, grabbing the map and starting towards the staff room. They ran as fast as they could given their tired state, and finally reached the door.

"What in the world is going on out here?" McGonagall asked she opened the door.

"Professors," George gasped out. "Sirius Black....he's here, by the whomping willow, with Harry Potter."

"Sirius Black?" McGonagall exclaimed. "And Potter you say?"

"Yes ma'am," Fred replied for his brother. "Somebody else was with Potter, Pet-"

"There you are!" Came a voice, from down the hall. Fred turned to see Argus Filch approaching them, grinning maniacally. "Knew you were behind it. These four wrecked an entire hallway, Professor, and then ran for it." He looked at Fred menacingly. "Thought you'd get away with it, did ya?"

"Please Professor, we're telling the truth," George pleaded. "Harry Potter is about to run into Sirius Black on the first floor by the whomping willow. You have to do something."

McGonagall eyed the entire group skeptically.

"Very well," she finally agreed. "I will contact the headmaster, and you will wait for me here. Mr. Filch, I will take it from here."

Filch nodded and left, but not before smirking at the group one last time. McGonagall walked to the fire and took a handful of floo powder from the pot on the mantle.

"Headmaster's office, Minerva McGonagall calling," she stated clearly. She was instantly whisked away, leaving the four Gryffindors alone in the room.

"I'm not sure she believed you...." Seamus said uncertainly.

"One too many pranks, I believe," George said sadly.

Fred looked agitated as well when suddenly Ron got up and grabbed a handful of the floo powder himself.

"What are-"

"I'm contacting dad," Ron said. "He'll believe us, and he can get Fudge to send aurors." With that, he threw the powder into the flames and called the Ministry of Magic.

When Harry finally exited out onto the castle grounds, he was severely winded, and had to stop for a moment to regain his breath. As he braced himself against the wall, a cold nose poked his hand.

"Wha-" He exclaimed, started. "Sirius!" He hissed at the black dog next to him. "I told you to wait! Come on."

Grabbing the dog by the scruff of his neck, he walked as fast as he could toward the whomping willow, which was still frozen in place from when Sirius had exited onto the grounds. When they were safely inside the tunnel, Sirius transformed back into his human form.

"Where is he!" He snarled. "Where's Pettigrew?"

"You're not supposed to be here," Harry bit out angrily. "You're putting us both in danger, get a hold of yourself!"

Sirius seethed for a moment before exhaling heavily.

"I know, and I'm sorry, but I have to see him. Please Harry, I have to see him."

"Wait until we get to the shack," Harry said as they continued walking. They continued in silence until they had arrived at the end of the tunnel, which opened to reveal a small, dilapidated room with a sofa, 2 broken chairs, and a broken table.

"Sit," Harry commanded, pointing the sofa. "Hand me your wand."

"What?" Sirius asked, shocked.

"Hand me your wand," Harry repeated. "If you want to beat on him, fine, but I won't have you going crazy and killing him by accident."

Sirius muttered angrily to himself, but complied.

"Now what?" He asked when Harry continued to look at him.

"You need to understand something," Harry said seriously. "You want revenge, I get that. You need to face him, I get that too. But you stop when I say, got it?" He waited for Sirius's slow nod before continuing. "And remember, he has to be recognizable for when I show him to Dumbledore."

When he had finished, Harry took the stunned rat from his pocket and placed it on the floor. With another flick of his wand, the rat slowly morphed into the pathetic looking form of Peter Pettigrew, which Harry immediately bound with transfigured ropes before hitting him with a foot-freezing curse and enervating him.

Pettigrew groaned as he slowly opened his eyes, and that was all the invitation Sirius needed.

"YOU BASTARD!" He roared, slamming his fist into Pettigrew's gut. Harry frowned and cast a silencing charm around the room as

Pettigrew doubled over in pain. Sirius grabbed the back of his head before throwing a knee to his face, snapping him back up to eye level.

“WHY? WHY DID YOU DO IT!” Sirius yelled as he walked around the bound man like a predator. “AFTER EVERYTHING WE DID FOR YOU! WHY!”

“I had no choice!” Pettigrew whined, eyes full of fear. “He would have killed me! What would you have done?”

“COWARD!” Sirius cried, landing a punch to Pettigrew’s face. “I WOULD HAVE DIED!” Another punch. “LIKE A MAN!” Sirius slammed his elbow into the side of Pettigrew’s head and the man immediately went limp. It looked like Sirius was about to start stomping on the unconscious body, but Harry stopped him.

“That’s enough,” he said firmly. Sirius reluctantly back off and began to pace around the room.

“Feel better?” Harry asked sarcastically.

“A little,” Sirius growled. “Can I have my wand back now?”

“Not if you’re going to use it on him,” Harry said warningly.

Sirius glared at him, but promised not to, and Harry handed him his wand.

“He deserves worse,” Sirius muttered as he sat back down on the sofa. Harry sighed.

“Sirius, we can’t just sit here and beat him,” he said calmly. “We have to get him to the right people so that you’ll be cleared.”

“He helped murder your parents, Harry!” Sirius cried. “And you want to just let him go? How can you even suggest that?”

“I’m not suggesting-” Harry began, but stopped abruptly when he suddenly had a very ominous feeling.

“Move!” He suddenly yelled, diving to his right. As he did so, two red stunning spells flew into the room within a second of each other. The first one hit Sirius in the chest, causing him to drop his wand, and the other passed right through where Harry had been standing. Harry was on his feet immediately and cast a quick shield as he scanned the room for his attacker. Another stunner dissipated harmlessly in front of him, followed by a bright yellow spell that Harry recognized as a piercing curse. Swearing, Harry sidestepped smoothly as the spell shattered his shield and threw a reductor curse in the direction that the spells were coming from. The spell impacted the wall next to the tunnel leading back to Hogwarts, showering the opening with bits of broken wood. Harry was about to follow with another attack when he heard a clatter from behind him. He whipped around, wand raised, to see a large rat scampering across the room, and realized that the clatter he had heard was the wand that Sirius had dropped. Pettigrew had grabbed it and removed the bindings Harry had placed on him before changing to animagus form to escape. Harry summoned the fleeing rat to his hand and re-stunned it, but was immediately forced to dive forward as the wall next to him exploded from a reductor curse. A large piece of wood sliced into Harry’s back as he dove, and he immediately concentrated on blocking the pain as he sent two more reductor curses back into the main room. Both were reflected by an expertly formed shield as Severus Snape stepped into the room, sneering.

“I knew you were stupid, Potter, but I didn’t think you were this stupid,” Snape said. “Helping the convict that killed your parents and fighting a teacher? Tsk Tsk.” Snape snapped his wand forward and threw another piercing curse followed by a stunner.

“He’s innocent! Pettigrew is the traitor! Harry yelled as he summoned the top of the broken table and threw it into the path of the curses. “I have him, just wait!”

“Don’t try foolish tricks with me,” Snape spat before his eyes took on a fiendish gleam. “I’ve waited a long time for this, Potter. I’ll see you expelled and Black kissed for this.” He grinned evilly as he threw two more curses at Harry.

“Pettigrew is an animagus,” Harry said desperately as the curses hit his shield. “A rat. I have him with me, I’ll show you!” He sidestepped again as a piercing curse flew at him. “Stop attacking me and listen!”

“Pettigrew is dead!” Snape snapped. “Give up!” A thick rope shot out of Snape’s wand toward Harry, who countered with a cutting curse before sidestepping Snape’s stunner.

“So be it,” he hissed. Raising both his hands, he unleashed two blasting curses that destroyed everything between him and the Professor, and left a giant hole in the floor. Snape raised a shield, but was still sent flying backwards into the crumbling wall. Pressing his advantage, Harry threw a piercing curse with his wand and a stunner with his hand, following immediately with a banishing charm that sent a large piece of nearby wood flying directly at Snape’s head. Snape avoided the piercing curse and reflected the stunner, but the wood caught him in the side of the head, opening a large gash and sending him crashing to the floor.

Harry immediately sent two stunners at him, hoping to end the battle immediately, but Snape moved faster than Harry had ever seen him move before, rolling out of the way and leveling his wand at Harry. With a snarl, he snapped it forward and a sickly yellow spell with a greenish hue flew towards Harry, who threw up his most powerful protego shield. The spell hit the shield, but instead of dissipating like it should have, it somehow slid around the shield, hitting Harry in his left shoulder. Harry gasped from the burning pain as a giant gash opened along his left arm, rendering it useless. Snape followed with a muddy brown curse that seemed to ooze through the air towards Harry. Not wanting a repeat of the last curse, Harry sidestepped the curse and threw a bolt of lightning at Snape as he began to circle the potions professor, who continued to cast spells that Harry had never seen before.

Just as Harry and Snape were beginning their duel, Kingsley Shacklebolt arrived in Hogsmede with his team of 6 aurors.

"We know that he's between here and school," Shacklebolt barked. "The Minister is with Dawlish and his team, and they'll work from the castle down, we work from here up. Any questions? Good, let's-" He was interrupted by a loud blasting sound coming from somewhere just outside the village.

"That came from the Shrieking Shack," one of the aurors said in surprise.

"Then that's where we start," Shacklebolt told his team. "Move out!"

Back in the shack, both combatants were becoming frustrated. With only one arm to work with, Harry had to rely on constantly summoning and banishing physical objects to keep the potions master on the defensive. Harry's own curses, while powerful, were not powerful enough to completely overwhelm the potions master, and Snape's knowledge of obscure and dark attack spells forced Harry to avoid using conventional shields to protect himself. Harry realized that he wouldn't be able to beat Snape using curses alone, and that gave him an idea. He darted quickly to his right, unleashing a series of powerful piercing curses that forced Snape to conjure a small corporeal shield. As Harry moved, Snape turned to keep them facing each other until he was standing directly in front of a large rectangular piece of wood that had been a section of the broken wall. Harry cast another curse at Snape and then raised a shield before turning all his focus on the levitating piece of wood. Using it like a bat, he banished the right side away from him while simultaneously summoning the left side towards him, causing the wood to spin like a helicopter blade.

Unfortunately, Harry had taken his attention off of Snape just long enough to give the older man an opening. Snape had dodged Harry's curse and, seeing his opening, countered with a two curse combination.

"Valde Foro, Sectumsempra!" He called viciously. Just as the second curse flew from his wand, the large wood plank slammed into Snape,

sending him crashing into the far wall where he crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

Snape's piercing curse shattered Harry's shield just as Harry's final attack ended the fight. Harry saw the second curse coming, but could only twist slightly at the last minute as the curse caught him on the right side of his chest.

Harry fell to the ground immediately as he felt his chest ripped open. He gasped for air and looked down to find his shirt and robes, already stained from his previous wounds, now soaked through with his own blood. Closing his eyes, Harry fought off the fuzzy feeling in his head and concentrated his healing power. Slowly, the wounds closed and the bleeding stopped, but the pain in shoulder remained. Frowning, Harry tried again, but even though his shoulder appeared fine, it hurt incredibly to move.

Gritting his teeth, Harry returned to the previous room and enervated Sirius.

"What the-" Sirius said groggily. "What happened, I- HARRY!"

"No time," Harry snapped, cutting him off. He swayed slightly but caught himself against the wall. "Snape attacked, I won," he said, shaking his head to clear it. "I'm ok now, but we have to go."

"But Harry, you're-" Sirius started, but stopped when the front door in the next room was blown open.

"You're under arrest, don't mov- ARGH!" The lead auror yelled as Harry's blasting curse obliterated the wall between room and sent shards of wood slicing into his leg.

"Lumos Solem!" Harry called, flooding the entire entryway with blinding light. Turning, he grabbed Sirius before casting another using a reductor curse to open a hole in the back wall.

"Don't let them get away!" One of the Aurors called. "Somebody dispel that damn sun! And where are the bloody dementors!"

“Run!” Harry yelled to Sirius, throwing reductor curses over his shoulder as they left.

The two ran towards the forbidden forest, but it was clear that Harry was laboring. He tried to make himself invisible as he ran, but when he almost passed out from the effort, he decided not to try again. When they had run for a couple of minutes, Harry stopped and pulled the petrified rat out of his pocket.

“What are you doing?” Sirius gasped frantically. “They’re coming.”

“They have to know we have Pettigrew,” Harry panted back. “And that you’re innocent. I want you to disillusion yourself and hide farther back in the woods. I’m going to take Pettigrew, turn him in, and explain the situation so that they don’t have you kissed on sight.” He looked at the older man seriously. “It’s the only way.”

“What if they attack you, huh?” Sirius said angrily. “What then?”

“I can defend myself,” Harry said, not mentioning the fact that he could barely manage a proper shield at this point. “Besides, they’re aurors, so they have to know about your case. They’ll know who he is.” I hope, he added mentally.

“I hope you’re right,” Sirius muttered as he pulled his wand. He raised it above his head to disillusion himself as he walked away from Harry, but stopped abruptly.

“No, oh god, no,” he began to whimper. “No, no, no, no....” He crumpled the ground and began to rock himself back and forth.

“Sirius! What is it? What’s wrong?” Harry asked frantically, but then he felt it. The temperature was dropping rapidly, and Harry felt a familiar ball of ice begin to settle in his stomach.

“Dementors,” he swore to himself. Instantly, he fell to his knees in a meditative position and closed his eyes. He quickly fell in to the void of meditation, and began to concentrate his emotions on happiness. With all the energy that he had already expended, the process was

much harder than normal, but the stakes were also much higher, and Harry Potter was nothing if not determined.

Slowly, Harry began to call of feelings of happiness, and will them to form a protective barrier around him. Gradually, the cold receded and his eyes snapped open.

“Expecto Patronum!”

Instantly, an incredible silver mist erupted from his wand and coalesced into the form of a giant stag. The nearest dementors shrieked as they were forced back, and the entire forest clearing was suddenly aglow with brilliant white light. The patronus continued to circle Harry and Sirius, throwing its head violently at the nearby dementors, until the forest was clear. Its task done, it bowed to Harry before dissipating into the air.

“Expelliarmus!”

Harry felt the spell coming, but was unable to move quick enough and it caught him in the side. He looked up from the ground to see a young auror approaching him cautiously.

“Don’t move, kid,” the auror said as he shot up a flare of red sparks. “Now,” he said, turning back to Harry. “Where is-” The man abruptly crumpled as Sirius’s stunner caught him from behind.

“Nice shot,” Harry complimented, pulling the petrified rat out of his pocket. He retrieved his wand from the auror, but swayed for a moment as he tried to cast the spell.

“I got it,” Sirius said, seeing the boy’s exhaustion. He muttered a spell and the rat once again slowly became the human form of Peter Pettigrew.

“Ok, now hide,” Harry said, making sure Pettigrew was still unconscious. Sirius looked like he was about to argue, but the sound of approaching aurors made the decision for him, and he hid. With supreme effort, Harry enervated the stunned auror.

“Wh-Hey!” The man said, pointing his wand at Harry.

“This is Peter Pettigrew,” Harry said, indicating the unconscious man in front of him. “He’s alive, and he framed Sirius Black for murder. Sirius Black is innocent, this man is guilty.”

The auror just looked at Harry with an extremely confused expression, and Harry had to stifle a sigh.

“Auror Blane!” Kingsley Shacklebolt barked as he emerged from the trees. “Report!”

“Uh, well sir,” Blane began.

“Sirius Black is innocent,” Harry interrupted him. “Peter Pettigrew is the real Death Eater, and he’s right here.”

Shacklebolt eyed Harry suspiciously until he saw the unconscious man at his feet, and his eyes widened.

“Pettigrew...” he muttered. “Well, not what was I expecting, but good work Blane. Now, where’s Black?”

“He took a portkey and will be hiding until he’s sure that he’ll get a trial this time to prove his innocence,” Harry said coldly. “Can you guarantee me that, auror...”

“Shacklebolt,” Kingsley replied, annoyed. “And you are?”

“Harry Potter,” Harry said, extending his hand. Only the briefest surprise registered on Kingsley’s face as he took it.

“You’re Harry Potter,” Blane said, shocked. “Sir, this could be a trick. He’s probably in league with Black!”

“That’s enough Blane,” Kingsley said firmly. “Stand guard and wait for the others.” He knelt down by Pettigrew and made sure he was bound before enervating him and forcing a very small vial of potion down his throat.

“What’s your name?” Kingsley asked.

“Peter Pettigrew.”

“Did you serve Lord Voldemort?”

“Yes.”

“Did you fight Sirius Black in a London Alley on November 1st, 1981.”

“Yes.”

“Who cast the spell that killed 12 muggle bystanders?”

“I did.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to frame Sirius so that I could escape.”

“How did you escape?”

“I cut off my finger and changed into my animagus form and escaped down the sewer.”

“What is your animagus form?”

“A rat.”

“Where have you been for the last 12 years?”

“Living with the Weasley family as a pet.”

“Do you have contact with any other former Death Eaters?”

“No.”

“He was my parent real secret keeper, too,” Harry broke in. Kingsley glared at him for interrupting, but asked nonetheless.

“Were you the Potters’ secret keeper?”

“Yes.”

“You gave the information to Voldemort?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“He..H-He would have...would have killed me and my f-family if I didn’t.”

“It’s wearing off,” Kingsley muttered. He bound Pettigrew with ropes before turning back to Harry.

“That’s not enough-” Harry began, but he stopped when he once again felt dementors approaching. He tried to focus his emotions, but was interrupted by the arrival of the Cornelius Fudge and his auror group, who entered the clearing along with Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Lupin. Floating well behind the Minister were two dementors.

“What’s this? Where’s Black?” Fudge blustered. “And who is this?” He asked, pointing to Pettigrew.

“Wormtail!” Lupin exclaimed.

Harry saw the dementors move forward slightly and began to edge his way closer to Sirius as he trained vainly to summon positive emotions.

“Peter Pettigrew,” Dumbledore said, slightly awed. He turned to look at Harry twinkling madly. “It appears you’ve had an interesting day, Mr. Potter.” Dumbledore turned and looked exactly at Sirius. “As have you, Sirius.”

“BLACK? WHERE?” Fudge asked, looking around frantically. He turned and yelled back into the forest. “Find him!”

It happened so fast that Harry barely had time to register what was going on. At Fudge's call, his personal, two dementor escort came flying into the clearing and headed straight for Sirius. With a cry, Harry dove in front of them and tried to cast a patronus, but could only manage a heavy mist. The mist repelled the dementors just long enough for Dumbledore to banish them himself, but the damage was already done.

As Harry dove in front of the dementors and tried to repel them, two of the aurors with Fudge immediately threw stunners at him, hitting him square in the chest and sending him flying backwards into a nearby tree. Seeing this, Sirius snarled in rage and leapt from his hiding place, throwing a concentrated blasting curse at the two aurors. The curse dissipated on the aurors' shield, and soon a hail of curses was flying back towards Sirius from aurors all around the clearing. Sirius dove to his side to avoid some of them, and the rest were deflected by an incredibly powerful shield cast by Dumbledore.

"Arrest them all!" Fudge cried in a panic. "Don't let them escape!"

Soon curses were flying all over the clearing, and it was impossible to tell who was trying to curse who. Finally, there a giant flash and an incredible shockwave that knocked everyone to the ground.

"ENOUGH!" Dumbledore boomed. "THERE IS ONLY ONE ENEMY HERE, AND IT IS NOT I!"

As the light dissipated, a number of the aurors realized that they had lost their wands, which were lying in a pile at Dumbledore's feet as he stood in the middle of the clearing. Three aurors near the tree line were tangled up in vines from above them, and two more were bound by roots that appeared to have grown out of the ground.

"Now," Dumbledore continued calmly. "It would appear that we do not have all the facts with regard to Mr. Black, and our priority should be to discover the truth. Would you agree, Minister?"

"Well, of course," Fudge stammered, coming out from the tree he had been hiding behind.

“WHERE’S WORMTAIL?” Sirius yelled frantically, pointing to his now empty restraints. “HE’S GONE! WE HAVE TO-” He started to run off and was abruptly stunned by one of the aurors. Everyone tensed for a moment, wondering if that would set off another firefight, but no other curses were fired.

“Remus, can you smell him?” Dumbledore asked, turning to Lupin, who was glaring menacingly at the auror.

“I can try, but it’ll be hard in the forest,” Lupin said as he began to look around.

“Please do. Fawkes,” the phoenix abruptly burst into existence on Dumbledore’s shoulder. “We are looking for a rat animagus that is missing a finger. Please find him if you can.” Fawkes let out a trill and took off to search the forest.

“Spread out and search the forest!” Kingsley snapped to his team. “Clear anything you have to, but FIND ME THAT RAT!”

The aurors spread out and began to sweep the area as Dumbledore approached Harry, who was still unconscious, and enervated him. When Harry didn’t stir after the first attempt, Dumbledore frowned and tried again.

“Wha- Sirius?” Harry said groggily.

“Sirius is fine, dear boy,” Dumbledore said kindly. “He is taking a well deserved nap right next to you, in fact.”

Harry looked confused for a moment before his eyes landed on the roving auror teams. He clenched his jaw in frustration.

“Pettigrew?”

“I’m afraid so,” Dumbledore replied sadly. “When you were stunned for attempting to protect Sirius from the dementors, there was a slight altercation, and he escaped in the confusion.” Harry started to get up but Dumbledore stopped him. “You are already exhausted, Harry. Please, you can help the most by telling me exactly what happened

today, and why my potions professor is being treated for very serious injuries in the hospital wing.”

With a sigh, Harry leaned back and related the entire story to Dumbledore. When he got to the part about Snape using dark magic on him, he saw the headmaster’s eyes darken slightly, but he said nothing. When he had finished, Dumbledore looked at him thoughtfully.

“So it was Pettigrew all along then?” Harry nodded. “I must say, Harry, I have most impressed that you have been able to keep all this secret for so long. If I may ask, where were you keeping Sirius while he recovered?”

“Muggle hotel,” Harry answered shortly.

“A wise decision,” Dumbledore said, eyeing Harry speculatively. “In any case, with Pettigrew’s confession under veritaserum, Sirius should be free very soon. You have done a great thing today, Harry.”

“What about Pettigrew?”

“We can only hope that he is located,” Dumbledore replied slowly. “Otherwise, I fear he will hide himself even more thoroughly than he did previously.” He noticed Harry’s head drooping slightly and smiled softly. “Sleep, dear boy. You have done quite enough for one day.”

Harry felt like arguing with him, he really really did, but somehow his eyes refused to open, and his mouth refused to work.

I’ll tell him off tomorrow, Harry thought to himself as he slumped forward. With a sigh, he relinquished his hold on consciousness and fell swiftly into the warm embrace of darkness.

A/N Ok, there we go. Now for the bad news. I wanted to get this chapter out quickly because I’m going out of town for the next week or so and won’t have access to a computer, so the next update will probably take at least a couple

Harry awoke gradually to a darkened room that he immediately recognized as the hospital wing. As he sat up groggily, he noticed that it was already dark outside, and all the other beds were empty.

"Oh, you're finally awake," came the voice of Madame Promfrey as she suddenly appeared next to Harry. "How are you feeling? Any remaining dizziness?" Harry shook his head no.

"How long have I been out?" He asked.

"You were brought in yesterday afternoon," the matron answered. "You've been asleep for over 24 hours, Mr. Potter." She eyed him sternly. "I certainly hope this isn't becoming a habit."

"So do I," Harry muttered, wincing slightly as he moved his shoulder. "What happened to my shoulder? It still hurts, and I couldn't move it at all yesterday."

Madame Promfrey frowned. "That was a nasty spell you took, Mr. Potter, very nasty. That wound resisted all standard healing charms; I had to use a special counter agent before I could even start to heal it. Even then, I wasn't able to fix you up completely." She looked at him apologetically. "I'm afraid you'll have to be careful with it for the next week or so and let it heal on its own."

Harry frowned and decided to change the subject.

"Do you know what's happening with Sirius Black?"

"Now, don't get yourself riled up," Madame Promfrey said, dodging the question. "The headmaster will be in first thing in the morning to answer your questions, until then you should try to get some more rest. I'm certain you're not fully recovered, and don't even think about trying to leave." She glared at Harry, who shrugged and nodded. Satisfied, the matron set a potion on the table next to him and walked back to her office.

When she had gone, Harry realized that he actually did still feel rather drained, especially magically, and decided to take her advice. He

downed the potion that had been left for him and climbed back into bed, falling asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

He awoke the next morning feeling much more rested than the night before. As he devoured the breakfast that had been left for him by the house elves, the doors to the hospital wing opened and Sirius Black walked in. When he saw Harry, his face lit up and he held out his hands, motioning to his new clothes.

"Well, what do you think?" Sirius asked with a laugh. "You think freedom suits me?"

Harry's eyes widened. "You're free? Officially?"

"Got the official pardon yesterday," Sirius answered proudly. "And a nice little settlement to boot." His face became serious. "Harry, I can't thank you enough for what you did for me yesterday. Without you, I would have been kissed for sure."

"I'm just glad you're free," Harry said earnestly. "Did they find Pettigrew?"

"No, the rat got away, again," Sirius growled. "But Shacklebolt had his confession under veritaserum, and everybody saw him before he escaped, so I'm in the clear." His face regained its happy expression. "Actually, there's something else-" He began, but stopped when the doors to the hospital opened and Dumbledore entered.

"Ah, I see you've beat me to it," the headmaster said with a smile. "It's good to see you awake, Harry. How are you feeling?"

"Much better," Harry answered politely. He noticed that Sirius had a strange expression on his face and gave him a questioning look. Sirius shook his head slightly and Harry turned back to Dumbledore.

"Have you told him the news yet, Sirius?" Dumbledore asked, twinkling madly.

"What news?" Harry asked, looking back and forth between the two older wizards.

“Well,” Sirius began. “I was thinking about what you told me about your guardian problems, and it turns out that since I’m innocent, I’m your legal guardian.” Seeing Harry’s eyes widen at the implication, he held up his hand. “Now hear me out. I’m your legal guardian, but I’m also a pure-blood with plenty of money, which makes me eligible to adopt your sister as well. So, if you’ll have me, I, uh, well,” he took a deep breath. “I’d like to adopt you and Row.”

Harry was stunned for a moment, but it passed quickly, and he considered what Sirius had said.

“The minister agreed to this?” He asked Dumbledore.

“Apparently, the minister was under the impression that he would receive some rather bad press if he did not,” the headmaster said, his twinkle increasing. “I believe it had something to do with your Godfather’s false imprisonment, but I cannot be sure.”

Harry looked at Sirius questioningly. “You blackmailed the Minister of Magic?”

“I never did have much respect for authority,” Sirius said with a grin.

Harry was silent for a moment as he considered this new opportunity. “Well, you’ll have to meet Row, and Jack,” he said, thinking ahead.

“Already done,” Sirius said quickly. “I met them both yesterday, and then again this morning. They’re both waiting to see you, in fact.”

“I have taken the liberty of excusing both Miss Thomas and yourself from classes today,” Dumbledore said with a smile. “You can see them whenever you are ready.”

“Then I’m ready now.” Harry said immediately. Dumbledore nodded and made his way over to the doors, leaving Harry and Sirius alone.

“What’s wrong, Sirius?” Harry asked quietly. “You’ve had a strange look on your face since Dumbledore came in.”

"It's nothing," Sirius answered immediately. Harry looked at him skeptically and Sirius sighed. "It's just that, well, he thought I was guilty," Sirius admitted slowly. "I'm not sure how I feel about that. He was our leader, and I fought for him, but he didn't even try to get me a trial before they sent me away." He shook his head. "I know I can't expect him to know everything, and it really did look like I was the traitor, but still, he should have done something, anything..." He trailed off.

"Don't put too much faith in Dumbledore," Harry answered quietly. "He's just as human as you or I."

"I suppose, and I'm not really mad, exactly, I'm just..." Sirius paused as he searched for the right word. "I guess I'm just confused."

"That's understandable."

"Yeah, I suppose it is," Sirius said thoughtfully. "Hopefully it will all work out in time." He smiled. "At least now I've actually got time, that's gotta count for something."

Harry nodded just as the hospital doors opened again and Jack and Row came rushing in, followed by Dumbledore.

"Careful Row," Harry said as his sister approached. "I'm still a little sore."

"I'm just glad you're alright," Row sniffed, giving him a small hug before turning to Sirius. "H-Hello Mr. Black."

Sirius chuckled. "Didn't I tell you to call me Sirius?"

"She gets shy," Jack said, shaking Sirius's hand. Row glared and punched him in the arm.

"I can see that," Sirius chuckled. "I'll let you three talk for a minute." He smiled at the group before walking over to where Dumbledore was standing.

"So you guys already know about Sirius wanting to adopt us?" Harry asked his siblings.

"He told us yesterday," Row admitted.

"And?"

"And it seems too good to be true," Jack said honestly. "You two are already friends, and he even agreed that we should all live together, just like the Diggorys. Besides," Jack said with a grin. "I like the guy."

"That's because he's as big a kid as you are," Row grumbled, but grinned nonetheless.

"What'd you think about it, Row?" Harry asked her seriously.

"I like him too, Harry," Row replied. "He does seem a little immature, but he's nice, and he obviously cares a lot about you, so I think it's great. The real question is what do you think? You know him the best, after all."

"Yeah," Harry said with a slow nod. "I'm just a little worried that he's going to take the whole guardian thing too seriously. Sometimes he gets these ideas that he needs to protect me from things that I can obviously deal with, and I'm afraid it will get worse."

"Maybe if he knew you better, he wouldn't do that," Row said wisely.

"Let's be honest with ourselves," Jack broke in. "No matter what you decide, you're going to have to deal with adults telling you what to do; it just comes with the territory. At least with Sirius you know you'll be able to talk to him, and who knows? Maybe he'll even understand."

Harry thought about that for a moment before he came to a decision.

"You both think we should do it?" He asked, both his siblings nodded. "Then we will." Both Jack and Row broke into smiles.

"Hey Sirius!" Jack called loudly. "Looks like you've got some new roommates!"

It took nearly a full minute for Sirius to realize that Harry was actually agreeing to live with him, and then it took another five to calm him down. Once he had stopped thanking everyone in sight, Sirius and Dumbledore went to the Ministry to make everything official, and Harry and Row showed Jack around Hogwarts.

“Wicked,” Jack said softly as he observed one of the school ghosts float through a nearby wall. “I can’t believe this is a school, it feels more like an amusement park.”

Row giggled. “Actually, after a while you don’t even notice.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Harry said reasonably. “It’s more that strange things stop surprising you.”

“You mean like that?” Jack snorted as they passed a painting of an elderly wizard being chased by what appeared to be an overgrown tomato.

“Exactly like that.”

Jack just shook his head. “What about Quidditch? That sounded fun, where do you play?”

“I already told you,” Row said impatiently. “We can see the pitch after you see the lake.”

“What’s there to see? It’s a lake!”

“First rule of Hogwarts,” Row said with a superior grin. “Nothing is ‘just’ anything. Sure, it’s a lake, but it also happens to be home to a giant squid and a colony of merpeople.”

“You have Mermaids in your lake?” Jack asked, astonished. “I take it back then, show me the lake.”

The three continued to trade affectionate banter as they made their outside the castle and down towards the lake. As they approached the water's edge, the bell rang, signaling the end of the first period, and a large group of students started walking towards them from the direction of Hagrid's hut.

"Where are they all coming from?" Jack asked with a puzzled look on his face.

"Care of Magical Creatures is taught down there," Row answered. "Looks like it was the sixth years."

Row's suspicion was proved right when Harry saw the distinct form of Cedric Diggory break away from the main group and walk towards them.

"Jack? What are you doing here?" He asked as he approached.

"Babysitting," Jack said, straight faced. Row snorted and Cedric laughed.

"Somehow I doubt that," he said with a grin before turning to Harry. "How are you, Harry? After everything with Snape and Pettigrew, I mean."

Harry was speechless for a moment before letting out a heavy sigh.

"I guess I should know better than to expect anything to stay secret around here," he said with a shake of his head. "How much does everybody know?"

"Dumbledore made a speech yesterday at dinner," Row said apologetically. "He told everyone about Sirius and Pettigrew, and how you had saved Sirius from being kissed."

"Like I need more attention," Harry groaned. "What about Snape?"

"Somebody overheard the aurors talking about it," Cedric said. "But even without that, it wasn't that hard to piece together. He left right after you did and was brought back unconscious from Hogsmede,

which was where you had gone. Add in the fact that everybody knows you hate each other, and...." He shrugged apologetically.

"Anything else?"

"That's about it," Cedric said after thinking for a moment. "A lot of people would love to know what you did to Snape to put him in the hospital wing overnight." He smirked. "I think you'll find that your stock went up with most of the students too."

"I'd rather they just left me alone," Harry said quietly.

Jack snorted. "Like that'll ever happen."

"You're probably right on that one," Cedric answered honestly. "Dumbledore kind of played you up as a hero for finding Pettigrew and protecting Black, so don't be surprised if you get a few awed looks. Hell," he shook his head. "I'm a little in awe myself. Snape, aurors, and then dementors? That's impressive no matter who you are."

"Can't you do anything normal?" Jack asked jokingly.

Cedric laughed. "Normal is overrated anyway. I've gotta get to class, how long are you going to be around, Jack?"

"No idea," Jack said with a shrug.

"Well, if you stick around for a while come find me."

"Sounds good."

"Alright then, later guys." Cedric grabbed his bag and walked briskly back towards the castle.

"You're awful quiet there, sis," Jack said with a smirk.

"What? Oh," Row said quickly. "I was just, uh, thinking. About the whole adoption issue. You don't think the Diggorys will be mad, do you?"

"I don't see why they would," Harry said reasonably. "Sirius is already my guardian, after all."

"I guess that's true," Row mused quietly before looking at Jack curiously. "You and Cedric seemed rather friendly, what was that about?"

"Uh," Jack stammered. "Well, don't be mad, but he came to see me not too long ago." Harry looked up in surprise. "Not for anything bad," Jack said quickly. "But, you know, we were thinking about living with his family, and I'm closer to his age than you are, so he wanted to talk to me about it." Jack shrugged. "We hung out with Christy and a couple of her friends and had a pretty good time."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Harry asked.

"Now, don't take this the wrong way Harry, but you've been pretty busy for the last few weeks. I figured I'd wait until we all got together again, but well..." he shrugged. "I guess it doesn't really matter now, but you seem to have resolved your issues with him too."

"I guess that's true, although I wouldn't exactly call him a friend," Harry said cautiously. "But at least he had the guts to apologize to my face, and he took a pretty big risk by helping me with the Malfoy thing."

"Yeah, he's cool like that," Jack said with a shrug. "What exactly did he do with the Malfoy prank?"

"He was my alibi," Harry answered. "He made sure that Sprout knew he and I were practicing, and then made sure it was visible for everybody to see."

"How'd he do that?"

"I can't say, sorry," Harry said, shaking his head. "I promised him I wouldn't tell anyone."

"I've been trying to find out how he did it for two weeks," Row said with an exasperated look. "That's the only thing he'll say."

"Ah well," Jack said, shrugging. "I guess some things are better left unknown. Plus I can always ask him if I want to." He grinned as he turned to look back towards the lake. "Now, where's this giant squid?"

The three spent the rest of the morning touring the grounds of Hogwarts, and soon it was lunchtime. Together, they headed back to the Great Hall and took seats at the end of the Ravenclaw table. Harry took a quick survey of the hall as they entered, doing his best to ignore all the awed looks he was getting.

"We're glad you're alright, Harry," Padma said as she took a seat near the group.

"Thanks," Harry replied, giving the table a small smile.

"Look, there's Hermione," Row said as the bushy-haired girl entered the hall. "HERMIONE! OVER HERE!"

Hermione appeared slightly startled at hearing her name called out in the Great Hall, but when she saw Harry sitting next to Row at the Ravenclaw table she immediately started towards them.

"Hi Harry," she said as she approached. "And you're Jack, right?" Jack looked a little surprised and nodded. "I met you in Diagon Alley once," Hermione clarified before turning back to Harry. "How are feeling, Harry? Professor Dumbledore said you'd been injured."

"I'm fine now," Harry assured her. "I was just tired, mostly."

"And who wouldn't be?" Padma said seriously. "Dumbledore told us how you managed to fight off the Ministry aurors and dementors."

Harry frowned at that skewed version of events, but said nothing.

"Ok Harry, tell us the truth," Sarah said, leaning forward conspiratorially. "Did you really fight Snape and beat him?"

"It wasn't much of a fight, really," Harry said slowly. "I caught him by surprise and knocked him out; I don't think he even saw me."

"Too bad you didn't kill him," Jack muttered, shooting a glare towards the head table. It took him a moment to realize that Snape was absent, as was the headmaster.

"Uh, isn't he your uncle?" Padma asked uncertainly.

"A bastard is all he is," Jack answered with a snort. "As far I'm concerned, my only family is sitting at this table."

"Same here," Row said firmly.

"Fair enough, I guess," Padma said with a shrug, still looking slightly confused. "So how long are you here for, Jack?"

"I'll probably head back after lunch," Jack answered in between bites. "I'm sure Harry has things to do, and I should get back anyway."

"How did you get here, anyway?" Harry asked curiously.

"Dumbledore came and got me himself, actually," Jack answered. "He brought a portkey that told me to come to his office when I was ready to go back."

"Not to sound inconsiderate," Sarah said slowly. "But this isn't the first time Harry's been in the hospital, so why did he get you this time?"

"There was some other stuff going on," Harry said vaguely. "If everything works out, Row should be able to tell you tomorrow. Until then, you'll just have to trust us." Harry suddenly remembered something and turned to Hermione. "I assume you know why I asked you to look for Weasley's rat now?"

Hermione gave him a confused look. "No, why? Should I?"

Harry frowned. "What did Dumbledore say about Pettigrew?"

“Just that he had snuck into Hogwarts and you’d caught him,” Hermione said, clearly puzzled.

“He didn’t say how he snuck in?” Hermione shook her head no. “He was an animagus, a rat animagus, to be precise.” Hermione’s eyes widened and Harry nodded. “Exactly. Weasley’s rat wasn’t a rat at all, it was Pettigrew the whole time.”

“That’s why you were upset when it went missing,” Hermione said in understanding. “And why you had me look for it, you found out it was him.”

“Uh, somebody want to explain what’s going on here?” Padma broke in, looking befuddled.

“You can tell them,” Harry said to Hermione. “I’m going to speak with Dumbledore.”

“I don’t think he’s back yet,” Jack said, looking once again at the headmaster’s empty seat.

“That’s weird,” Harry said, frowning. “He said they’d be back by lunch at the latest.” He thought for a moment before reaching a decision. “I’m going up to his office anyway.”

“In that case, I’ll come with you,” Jack said, standing up. He reached over and gave Row a hug. “It’s time for me to get out here anyway.”

Row bid her eldest brother farewell and he and Harry made their out of the hall and up towards the headmaster’s office. It wasn’t until they reached the gargoyle that Harry realized he didn’t know the password.

“Licorice wand,” Jack said, surprising his brother. “He gave me the password earlier,” the older boy explained. Harry nodded in understanding and was about to reply when he heard a very loud voice he immediately recognized as Snape’s coming from inside the office.

“...absolutely unacceptable!” The potions master was saying. “It’s bad enough she has to live with Potter, which, may I remind you, I only agreed to on your insistence, but this is too far headmaster!”

“It cannot be helped, Severus,” came Dumbledore’s calm reply. “The papers have been filed and the matter is closed.”

Harry glanced at Jack, who grinned. They could almost feel Snape fuming.

“Time to crash the party,” Jack said with a smirk as he knocked on the door.

“Who’s that?” Snape said suspiciously.

“If you would take a seat over here, Severus,” Dumbledore said, motioning to the seat farthest from the door. Still fuming, Snape complied. “Come in Mr. Thomas, Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore greeted.

Jack opened the door and entered the room first, despite Harry’s attempt to block him.

“Well, isn’t this a surprise,” Jack said with mock astonishment. “Something wrong, Snape?” He spat the last word like a curse.

“You and your filthy-” Snape began.

“That is quite enough, from both of you,” Dumbledore interrupted calmly. “Severus, there is nothing more to be done, I’m afraid. You are welcome to see for yourself, however.”

Snape, however, was glaring at the new entrants so viciously that it appeared he was trying to decide whose head he wanted to rip off first.

“What’s he still doing here?” Harry asked, subconsciously shifting into a defensive stance. Next to him, Jack did the same.

“I’m not sure what you mean, Harry,” Dumbledore answered.

"He attacked me," Harry replied incredulously. "And he used a lot more than stunners. Whatever curse he hit me with was so vicious that Madame Pomfrey couldn't even heal it completely. How can you possibly not know what I mean?"

Dumbledore sighed. "I'm afraid it isn't that simple, Harry," he said calmly, forestalling Snape's objection. "There are other matters to consider."

"Well, isn't this cute," Jack said sarcastically. "Afraid to fight your own battles, Snape?" He snorted. "Then again, I guess we all know how the last one turned out." He glanced at Harry and smirked.

Snape growled and reached for his wand, but Dumbledore was faster and abruptly there was a shimmering blue shield between the two sides.

"Slimy git," Jack muttered.

"Here is your portkey, Mr. Thomas," Dumbledore said, ignoring his comment. "Harry can activate it for you whenever you are ready. It will please you both to know that all the proper paperwork has been filed with the Ministry, and Sirius is now your official guardian Harry." He smiled softly at them before straightening. "If there's nothing else?"

"I think that's it," Harry said slowly, watching Snape out of the corner of his eye.

"Very well then. Sirius should be here soon to discuss your future plans, I shall see then."

Recognizing their dismissal, Jack and Harry turned and walked out of the office, but not before Jack shot one final mocking look at Snape.

When the two had gone, Dumbledore took a deep breath and removed the shield.

"How can you let those brats get away with this!" Snape exploded.

Dumbledore sighed and rubbed the bridge of nose tiredly. "This cannot continue, Severus." He said quietly.

"If you were not so hesitant to discipline the boy, it wouldn't!"

"Is that so?" Dumbledore replied with a piercing look. "Is that why you felt the need to use dark magic on a student?"

Snape snorted. "The boy may be stupid, but he's also dangerous. You know what he can do, and trust me, those blasting curses weren't exactly harmless."

"Be that as it may, we have been over this many times before, and yet it seems that we are no closer to a resolution," Dumbledore said tiredly. "Therefore, I believe it would be best for all involved if you were to take the rest of the year off."

"W-What?" Snape stuttered, astonished.

"You will remain a member of the Hogwarts staff for the rest of the year, but you will not be teaching," Dumbledore said firmly. "Your salary will remain the same, which should give you ample means to travel if that is what you desire. All that I ask is this," he looked at Snape seriously. "Think very hard about what you are doing, Severus, and why you are doing it. If you no longer wish to be a full Professor, I'm sure we could work out some other arrangement."

Snape shook his head angrily. "Why must you cater to his every whim!" He snarled.

Dumbledore gave him a piercing look. "You, of all people, should know how important Harry Potter is to us, Severus."

Snape looked confused for a moment before quickly regaining his sneer. "Prophecies have been wrong before," he said carefully. "For all we know, it was fulfilled when the Dark Lord was thrown from his body." He eyed Dumbledore shrewdly. "Unless there was more....."

"Are you willing to take that chance, Severus?"

“You know I’m not.”

“Nor am I,” Dumbledore replied. “It is imperative, therefore, that we continue to build trust with Mr. Potter. It would please me greatly if you and he were able to overcome your mutual animosity, but since that does not appear to be possible, I will settle for merely separating the two of you.” Dumbledore leaned forward and regarded Snape seriously. “No matter what you decide, I will always consider you a valued member of this staff, Severus.”

For a moment, Snape looked torn between anger and acceptance, but eventually his respect for the headmaster won out and he seemed to deflate.

“May I keep my quarters in the castle?”

“I will not force you to completely vacate your quarters, however I do ask that you only use them when it is absolutely necessary. I have taken the liberty of acquiring a temporary home for you.” Dumbledore reached into his pocket and withdrew a piece of paper. “I hope it is acceptable.”

Snape took the paper with a nod and put it into his pocket.

“There is one more thing,” Dumbledore said carefully. “I trust I can count on your discretion with respect to Mr. Potter's unique talents. It would not do for the information to become public knowledge.”

Snape sneered but nodded. “I’ll keep your secrets, but mark my words, headmaster: that boy will never be what you want him to be.”

“I am truly sorry it has come to this, Severus,” Dumbledore said sadly. “However, I sincerely hope that this time away will allow you to come to terms with what it means to be a Professor here.” And how dangerous Harry Potter really could be. He added silently.

After Jack had taken his the portkey back to their flat, Harry found Row and the rest of the girls in the library.

"Is it official?" Row asked as he approached.

"It's official," Harry said with a smile, causing Row to grin excitedly.

"What's official?" Padma asked, confused. Row looked at Harry questioningly and he nodded.

"Go ahead, I need to talk to Tracey and Blaise anyway," Harry said, spying his Slytherin friends at another table. He made his way towards them as Row launched into her story.

"Well, if it isn't the conquering hero himself," Blaise said as he approached. "You know, for someone who doesn't like attention you sure end up on the front page a lot."

"Blaise!" Tracey hissed, glaring at him. "Are you ok Harry?" She asked with concern.

"I'm fine," Harry replied dismissively. "I heard Dumbledore made a speech to the school though. How bad was it?"

"It wasn't bad at all," Tracey began, but Blaise interrupted.

"I believe his exact words were, 'Harry Potter continues to do us all great service in the face of incredible personal risk,' and that you should be 'commended for your efforts'." He broke in, smirking. Harry groaned.

"Well, it's true," Tracey said, glaring at Blaise.

Blaise shook his head. "That's irrelevant. Potter doesn't want that kind of attention whether it's true or not. Am I right?"

"You're not wrong," Harry said, leaning back in his chair.

"But you did a good thing," Tracey said, perplexed. "Why shouldn't you get credit for it?"

"I don't really care about that," Harry said with a shrug. "I didn't do it so I could take credit for it, I just did it. End of story."

"Good luck selling that story to the prophet," said Blaise, earning him another glare from Tracey.

"Why do you have to be so sarcastic all the time?" She asked angrily. "Not everything happens for your personal amusement, you know." With that, she stood hastily and walked out of the library.

Blaise looked shocked at Tracey's outburst, and Harry looked him questioningly.

"What was that about?"

"I don't know," Blaise said, shaking his head. "Something else is bothering her, maybe?"

Harry just shrugged noncommittally and began to let his mind wander to the possible consequences of Dumbledore's speech when someone cleared their throat right next to him. Startled, Harry and Blaise looked over to find Daphne Greengrass standing at the edge of their table looking contrite.

"Hey Potter, Zabini," she greeted softly. "Look, I know I haven't been very nice to you, either of you really, but for what it's worth, I'm sorry about what Malfoy was doing behind your back. I wanted to tell you, really, but..." she trailed off miserably.

Harry's brow furrowed in confusion and he looked over at Blaise, who was sneering.

"You actually expect us to believe that?" Blaise asked incredulously.

Daphne's shoulders slumped. "I guess not, and I suppose I really can't blame you. I just wanted to apologize. I'll leave now." She turned quickly and walked away, shoulders slumped in defeat.

"Can you believe that?" Blaise said as she left.

"Yeah, that was strange," Harry agreed. "She hasn't spoken a civil word to me all year, and now she apologizes for what Malfoy did?" He looked thoughtful for a moment. "I suppose it's possible that she knew about it before and Malfoy made her keep quiet..." He mused.

Blaise scoffed. "There isn't a person alive who could stop Greengrass from spreading something she wanted to spread. Don't let the innocent schoolgirl act fool you, Potter, she didn't mean a word of that apology."

"Then why apologize at all?"

Blaise shook his head. "I don't know, but rest assured, it wasn't because she feels bad. She wants something."

"It's possible," Harry admitted. "But don't you think it's just as likely that she's simply tired of dealing with Malfoy?"

"There's no way it's that simple."

"Honestly, I don't really care, one way or the other," Harry said earnestly. "If she stops hanging around with Malfoy, more power to her. If not, oh well." He shrugged. "Either way, it doesn't really affect me, so if her apology means she's going to be more civil towards me, then her reasons don't matter." Harry looked up and saw that Blaise was giving him a very strange look. "What?"

"I just don't get you, Potter," Blaise answered, shaking his head. "People like, Malfoy, Greengrass, and I have been taught how to play this game our whole lives, and for the last two years, everything played out exactly as expected. Then you get here and screw everything up without even trying." He laughed incredulously. "And the best part is, you don't even care. At first I thought it was just an act, but now I think you really, honestly, don't care. I mean, after Dumbledore's little speech you could have the entire school literally eating out of your hand if you wanted to, and instead you complain about the extra attention!"

Harry's expression didn't change. "So?"

Blaise looked at him dumbly for a moment before barking a quick laugh. "I guess that's what I get for stating the obvious." He paused for a moment as his chuckles subsided.

Harry looked at Blaise thoughtfully for a moment, as if deciding whether or not to say something.

"You know why I don't care, Blaise?" He finally said. "You practically said it yourself already. You and Greengrass were raised to play these little word games because eventually that's what will be expected of you; that's your world. But it isn't mine. I was perfectly happy living in the muggle world, and if given a choice, I would have stayed there."

"Why are you here, then?"

"Because you bastards wouldn't leave me alone," Harry said it half-jokingly, but Blaise could tell there was truth behind the words. "And that's why I hate the extra attention. I don't like the fact that I'm famous for something I had no control over, and I like it even less that that fame makes me a target for people like Malfoy. I came here to learn magic, that's it. I didn't come here to make a lot of friends and be popular."

"Mission accomplished, then."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Ha ha."

"You'd really rather live in the muggle world?" Blaise asked skeptically. "Why?"

Harry remained silent, and for a moment Blaise thought that he wasn't going to answer. Finally, he spoke.

"I can't relax here," Harry began softly. "Ever. Every wizard with a wand in their pocket who sees this damn scar is a potential threat." He shook his head slowly. "I guess it's different for you since you were raised as a wizard, but for me, the idea that any random guy off the street can incapacitate you without a word is unnerving, to say the least. A silent stunner or a body bind and you're completely helpless."

Even worse, a quick memory charm and you won't remember a damn thing. And that's not even counting spells like the imperious curse." He closed his eyes with a pained look on his face. "Most wizards can use any number of those spells, and they can use them at any time, for any reason. It's not like that in the muggle world. There, if you can defend yourself from physical attack, chances are you'll be fine. There's so many different ways to be attacked here, and so many different things to defend yourself from." He sighed heavily. "It makes it much harder."

"You make it sound like the wizarding world is a constant war zone," Blaise said skeptically. "It's not like wizards go around attacking each other for fun."

"No, but the opportunity is always there," Harry countered. "Are you telling me that Malfoy Sr. wouldn't take the opportunity to curse me if he was sure he could get away with it?" Blaise looked skeptical but said nothing. "He would, and you know it. So would his son, and probably a lot of other people, all because I don't fit in with their system, and I won't take their shit." He paused for a moment before continuing questioningly. "Answer this for me, Blaise, how do you think Voldemort got so powerful?"

Blaise cringed. "Please don't say that name."

"Why not?" Harry challenged. "Why are you afraid of it, of him? What makes you fear Voldemort?"

"Look, I understand the whole 'don't fear the name' thing, but the fact is that saying the Dark Lord's name got a lot of people killed in the last war. It's not like Death Eaters walked around with a sign on their back for everyone to see. In fact, you could never be sure who was working for him and who wasn't, and if the wrong person heard you, well, that was it." Harry shot Blaise a piercing look. "What?"

"What you just said? That's exactly what I'm talking about. You never knew who was working for him, and that's precisely the problem. You could have been friends with somebody for 10 years, then one day he walks into your office, shakes your hand, and hits you with an imperious curse. Then he hits you with a memory charm to make you

forget who cast the curse, and sends you out to murder your friends. Don't you see, each and every person in the wizarding world has the ability to do that anytime they want, for any reason. No matter how petty or stupid."

"Actually, that's not true," Blaise interrupted. "There's plenty of witches and wizards who can't perform the imperious or a memory charm."

"Can you tell who they are by sight?"

"Well, no," Blaise admitted. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Because if you can't tell by sight, then every person you pass on the street has that potential, and therefore you must assume the worst."

"I guess that makes sense," Blaise admitted grudgingly. "But I still think this is pretty ridiculous. It's not like everybody is out to get you."

"You don't understand," Harry sighed heavily. "It only takes one. It's the same principle as before. If there is even one person out there who really is out to get me, then every person on the street is potentially that person, which means I have to be constantly prepared."

"How is that different than in the muggle world?" Blaise countered. "A wizard could just as easily get you there."

Harry considered that for a moment before holding up three fingers. "Three reasons. One: most wizards stick out like a sore thumb in the muggle world already, and wouldn't be hard to spot. Two: I'm much more likely to be recognized in the wizarding world than in the muggle world, unless someone is specifically looking for me, in which case it doesn't matter where I am, because they'll come after me regardless. At least in the muggle world, I don't have to worry about someone deciding to take a shot at me because I happen to be alone somewhere. Unlike here, muggles don't whisper and point as I pass by. Three: the muggle world is quite large. Unlike the wizarding world, you don't see the same people every single day, and it's actually

possible to go somewhere and not bump into somebody that you've met before. It's quite refreshing."

"But they're, well, muggles," Blaise finally said.

"And I'm just a muggle who can do magic," Harry replied with a shrug.

"That doesn't make any sense."

"It does if you think about it." Harry said seriously. "Magic is something I can do, Blaise, not who I am."

Blaise looked thoughtful for a moment and then suddenly started chuckling.

"You know what?" He said as he laughed. "I think this is the most you've ever said about yourself, and it's been almost an entire year."

"I still don't trust you, if that's what you're worried about," said Harry. Blaise grinned.

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

When Harry returned to his normal classes the next day he was greeted with the pointed looks and whispers that he was expecting. However, when it became clear that all potions lessons for the rest of the week had been cancelled because Snape would no longer be teaching, his unwanted popularity reached a whole new level.

As he walked into Defense against the Dark Arts that afternoon, he was greeted with a standing ovation from the Gryffindors, and dark looks from the majority of his housemates.

"What's the matter Malfoy?" Ron Weasley said mockingly. "Something wrong? Why don't you run and tell Snape like you always do? Oh wait, that's right! You can't!" A number of the Gryffindors laughed.

"Who knew Potter was good for something after all?" Lavender Brown said loud enough for the entire room to hear. Next to her, Pavarti giggled and looked mockingly at Harry, who ignored her. With a sigh, he took a seat next to Hermione at the front of the room and focused on ignoring the argument that was sure to break out. Finally, Lupin came out of his office and began the lesson, which was on the different ways to spot a vampire allegiance and know how to deal with it. As usual, Harry enjoyed the lecture because it was one of few classes he had where he didn't already know most of the material, having never studied dark creatures on his own.

As the bell rang, Lupin motioned for Harry to stay, so he packed his bag and approached the front desk as the rest of the class filed out.

"I didn't get the chance before now, but I wanted to congratulate you, Harry," Lupin said, smiling. "I hear you conjured quite the patronus during your little scuffle."

"I couldn't have done it without your help, sir," Harry said seriously. "Thank you."

"No, Harry, it's I who should be thanking you," Lupin replied. "You've given me a second chance with a friend I thought was long gone. I don't think Sirius and I can ever really repay you."

"I'm just glad everything worked out."

"So am I. Although I have to say it's a good thing you know how to take care of yourself, Harry," Lupin said with a grin. "Sirius was never the most responsible of people. Fun, yes. Responsible? Well..." He trailed off with an amused shrug.

"Have you talked to him since he was acquitted?"

Lupin nodded. "Yes, we had a long talk the night you spent in the hospital wing. It was hard, at first, since each of us thought the other guilty back then. But we got through it, and now I'm just happy to have my old friend back." Lupin smiled at Harry before glancing at his watch. "Well, it appears I've made you late. I'll write you a note and let you be on your way." He summoned a quill and parchment and

began to write. "You know, Sirius couldn't stop talking about how you'll be living with him now," he said as he wrote. "He's quite happy about it."

"So am I sir," Harry replied honestly. "So am I."

As expected, the next few weeks were very tedious for Harry as he was forced to endure an ever increasing amount of attention from the rest of the Hogwarts student body. As a result, he found himself spending even more time than usual practicing on his own in empty classrooms throughout the school. Although he still practiced with Row and sometimes Hermione, working to develop their defensive spells, Harry also continued to work on his own original ideas in addition to studying ahead in his classes. By the time March gave way to April, the Hogwarts rumor mill had turned most of its attention away from Harry, dedicating itself instead to the upcoming Quidditch match between Slytherin and Gryffindor; something that suited Harry just fine.

The Saturday before the match, Harry was returning to the castle after an afternoon of flying when he saw his sister walk out of the castle and over towards him.

"There you are," Row huffed as he approached. "I've been looking for you since lunch, and it's almost time for dinner. Speaking of which," she grinned, "you must be pretty happy that you skipped lunch today."

"And why would that be?"

"You don't know?" Row checked her watch and shook her head. "It's better if you see for yourself, come on." She grabbed his arm and him back inside the castle.

When they arrived at the entrance to the Great Hall, Harry's eyes slid over to the Slytherin table before widening in astonishment. Each and every Slytherin present had red and gold stripes decorating their

faces, like they had all been sent through a giant candy striping machine. The Gryffindors, of course, were loving every minute of it.

"I always knew that Slytherins were really closet Gryffindors!" Yelled someone at the far end of the Gryffindor table.

"Don't worry, we'll dedicate our victory to them!" Someone else yelled back. The entire table laughed loudly.

"This happened at lunch?" Harry asked his sister quietly.

"Yep," Row affirmed. "Just when we were ready to leave, all the Slytherins starting breaking out in stripes." She giggled. "And let me just say, I don't think stripes are Malfoy's style."

"I don't really see what's so funny," Harry said, eyeing the Gryffindor table. "It's not even that embarrassing."

Row shook her head. "Maybe not for you, Harry, but look at your friend Blaise. He looks about ready to kill somebody." She stifled a laugh before continuing. "For most of them, being called a Gryffindor is about the worst insult I can think of, especially with the match coming up."

"Why haven't any of them reversed it yet?"

"Not everybody is Harry Potter, that's why," Row said with a smirk. "Plus it was probably the Weasley twins, and they're pranks are notoriously hard to reverse properly."

"Hey Potter!" Called Blaise from his seat.

"That's my cue," Row said as she took off for the Ravenclaw table.

"Hey, why weren't you at lunch?" One of the older Slytherins asked suspiciously as Harry approached. "If you knew about this, I'll-"

"You'll what?" Harry asked, stopping to look the other boy in the eye.

"I'll, uh...."

"He always misses lunch on Saturday," Blaise said as he walked up. "He uses the Quidditch pitch because no one else is on it."

"Oh," the older boy said dumbly. He stood awkwardly for a moment before turning back to the table.

"You're a lucky bastard," Blaise muttered as he and Harry walked over to their seats.

"Nobody's been able to reverse it?"

"They put a potion in the food," Blaise answered shortly. "All we can do is wait for it to wear off."

"You could use a flushing draught."

"You have one handy?" Harry shook his head. "Didn't think so, and without Snape here, we can't get ingredients, so we're screwed." He paused and lowered his voice. "It's alright though, they'll get theirs."

"How's that?"

"Just wait, it'll be soon."

Harry shot Blaise a calculating look before moving his eyes over the Gryffindor table, which was still full of laughter and finger pointing. With a shrug, Harry ran a detection charm on his food and started to eat.

About 10 minutes later, Harry began to feel uneasy. He couldn't put his finger on why, but he felt like something was building up, about to explode. He was just about to say something when he was shocked by a large explosion followed by loud cries from the Gryffindor table.

Harry was on his feet instantly, ready to defend himself, only to look on in confusion as Blaise and many of the other Slytherins started laughing. Looking back at the Gryffindors, he saw that many of them were covering in food and running away from their table as fast as they could. Looking closer, he saw the reason for their sudden fear:

two very long and menacing snakes which were gliding across the table.

Realizing this must have been what Blaise was talking about, Harry relaxed and sat back down.

“Your idea?” He asked Blaise casually.

“Nah, I just heard about it,” Blaise answered. “Good one though, don’t you think?”

Harry shrugged. “It obviously worked pretty well.”

“Look at the cowards run!” Marcus Flint yelled at the huddled Gryffindors. “What happened to bravery and courage?” He called mockingly. “I guess all it takes is a little snake and they run like girls!” The Slytherin table guffawed loudly.

“That’s quite enough, Mr. Flint,” said Dumbledore as he materialized in-between the two groups. “Now, would someone care to explain who did this?”

As Flint began to stammer excuses, Harry tuned him out and turned back to Blaise.

“What’s with the animosity all of a sudden, anyway?” He asked his friend.

“Quidditch,” Blaise said with a shrug. “House pride is on the line, and so is the cup.”

“It’ll get worse, too,” Tracey said, joining the conversation.

“What do you mean?” asked Harry.

“I mean that boys like those idiotic Weasley twins will keep trying to one up each other until the match,” Tracey said with a scowl. “So immature.”

“And you’re not?” Blaise challenged. “Miss ‘I can’t believe cosmetic charms won’t cover this?’”

“That’s different,” Tracey said, flushing slightly.

“Sure it is.”

“It is,” Tracey said stubbornly. “You’re a boy, and therefore incapable of understanding what really matters.”

“I’m really glad you two are talking again,” Harry said sarcastically.

Blaise just scoffed before turning to him.

“Women, eh? What’re you gonna do? You can’t live with ‘em.....” Harry waited for him to finish the sentence but Blaise just turned back to his dinner, completely ignoring the growing look of outrage on Tracey’s face.

As Tracey predicted, the prank rivalry between the two houses continued to escalate throughout the week. On Wednesday, the sixth year Defense class turned into an all out brawl, resulting in numerous detentions and a few overnight stays in the hospital wing. Harry, for the most part, managed to keep himself out of the Gryffindors’ cross hairs, but whether they were avoiding him or he was just lucky he didn’t know.

That Thursday, he was getting ready to leave the Great Hall following dinner when Row and Sarah came up to him.

“Library?” Row asked as they approached. Harry nodded. “Ok, I’ll ohh!” Row’s feet slid out from under her as she started up the steps, and she toppled backwards. Harry instantly dropped his bag to help, catching her only inches from the ground.

“I can’t believe you caught her,” Sarah said with a whistle. “That was really fast.”

"Are you ok?" Harry asked with concern.

"I'm fine," Row said, making a show of dusting herself off. "It was just a little slip." Harry nodded and the three resumed walking.

"Do you smell something funny?" Sarah asked, glancing around with a confused look on her face.

"I don't smell anything," Row said, testing the air. "Harry?"

"I don't either."

Sarah shrugged it off and the three continued to file out of the hall with the other students. As they were approaching the exit to the grounds, the traffic suddenly became very thick, and they could hear shouting coming from in front of them.

"What's going on?" Row asked nobody in particular.

"A bunch of Gryffs are blocking the way," an older Ravenclaw replied. "Said they have something to show us."

"It's probably just another prank," another said in a bored tone.

"MY DEAR CLASSMATES!" Came the amplified voice of Lee Jordan. "THANK YOU FOR COMING! I'D ESPECIALLY LIKE TO THANK OUR SLYTHERIN VICTIMS, ER, I MEAN FRIENDS, FOR SHOWING UP SO PROMPTLY! NOW, IF I COULD HAVE ALL THE RAVENCLAWS AND HUFFLEPUFFS MOVE TO THE SIDES, PLEASE. TRUST ME, YOU'RE NOT GOING TO WANT TO BE NEXT TO ANY OF THE SNAKES FOR THIS!"

"What're you playing at, Jordan?" Marcus Flint yelled, forcefully holding a young Hufflepuff girl next to him. Many of the Slytherins present were trying to work their way into the crowd, but most were being rebuffed.

"Let her go, Flint," Cedric Diggory said, grabbing the Slytherin's hand and prying it off the girl.

“Whatever,” Flint said as he shoved the girl away.

“Maybe you should move away from me,” Harry told Row as he moved into the vacated space.

“Not a chance,” Row replied stubbornly. Harry frowned.

“Row, I-”

“NOW THEN,” Jordan interrupted. “THE NOBLE HOUSE OF GRYFFINDOR IS PROUD TO PRESENT THE FIRST ANNUAL HOGWARTS HIPPOGRIFF MATING FESTIVAL!” As he finished, the outside doors were thrown open and in rushed a very large and very agitated hippogriff. With a loud cry, it launched itself toward the nearest group of Slytherins, sniffing wildly.

“IF YOU’RE NOT A SLYTHERIN, DON’T WORRY,” Jordan reassured the rest of the crowd as they flattened themselves against the walls. “THANKS TO SOME WELL PLACED PHEROMONES, THE SNAKES WILL BE THE ONLY ONES GETTING THE ATTENTION TODAY.” The Gryffindors roared with approval as the first group of Slytherins struggled to push each other in front of the beast. Pansy Parkinson went down hard and was immediately accosted by a very amorous hippogriff. “LOOK, BEAKY LIKES IT!” Laughed Jordan. “BUT DON’T BE JEALOUS, HE’S TOO EXCITED TO PICK ONE OF YOU JUST YET! AND DON’T WORRY GUYS, WE HIT YOU ALL WITH FEMALE PHEROMONES, SO YOU’VE GOT A CHANCE TOO!”

By this time, the majority of the Slytherins in the hall were climbing over each other trying to exit the entryway, only to find that all the exits were being blocked. A couple of students started firing curses at the hippogriff, but they were simply absorbed by animal’s thick hide. Frustrated, a few students started throwing curses at Lee Jordan and the rest of the Gryffindors, and soon there was a small fire being waged as Beaky continued his sexual assault of nearby Slytherins.

“Don’t stand by us!” A Ravenclaw girl near Harry shrieked. “Go away, go away!”

“He’s not going anywhere,” Row snapped back her. Harry simply ignored her as he started casting cleansing and air recycling charms on himself to remove the pheromones before he was noticed.

Unfortunately, Seamus Finnegan saw what he was trying to do, and alerted Jordan, who pulled a small vial from his robes and handed it over. Slowly, Seamus wove his way through the crowd, nudging people away from Harry until he and Row were standing alone. Smirking, he threw the vial slightly in front of Harry and Row where it shattered, sending its contents onto their feet and legs.

The effect was instantaneous. The Hippogriff, which currently had its beak buried in Vincent Crabbe’s neck, immediately spun and looked at Harry before rushing towards him.

Swearing loudly, Harry pushed Row against the left wall before pulling his wand and racking his brain for a plan. The Hippogriff continued to charge before veering slightly, which confused Harry for a moment, until he realized it was heading straight for Row.

That vial got her too! He realized as he threw himself in between the animal and his sister. Snapping his wand forward, he sent a concussion hex at the beast’s legs, causing it to stumble slightly and buying him time to shove Row farther behind him. He threw two more concussion hexes, causing the hippogriff to falter and let out an angry cry. Regaining its footing, the animal reared back and threw itself towards Harry...

...and right into a suit of armor that Harry had summoned before banishing directly at his attacker. The metal suit slammed into the animal with a spectacular crash, sending pieces of armor flying everywhere as the hippogriff was thrown violently back.

“Ok, I think that’s enough guys,” Fred Weasley said nervously. “Time to use the antidote.” He looked at his brother expectantly.

“What are you looking at me for, this wasn’t my idea,” George said, puzzled.

“It wasn’t mine either, but Lee gave you the antidote.”

"Well I don't have it."

"Then who's got it?"

"UH, I THINK WE NEED A TEACHER," Lee Jordan called out after overhearing their conversation.

"That won't work, we put up silencing charms," Fred said, now panicking slightly.

"Shit, this isn't good." George said, noticing the slightly more wild looking hippogriff. "You said these things made him harmless!"

"THEY'RE SUPPOSED TO," Lee replied, wincing slightly at his still amplified voice.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Slytherins had caught on to Harry's idea and were banishing everything they could as the not-so-harmless hippogriff. Harry could tell that it was getting angry, but there was nothing he could do to stop it. Motioning for Row to start moving, he began to edge his way outside.

Unfortunately, the instant Row began to move Buckbeak's eyed landed on her and he charged. With a curse, Harry banished another suit of armor into the animal's side as he once again put himself in-between Row and danger. The banished armor again sent the hippogriff sprawling, but it recovered much quicker than Harry had anticipated, lashing out with a hoof and landing a glancing blow on his forearm, causing him to drop his wand. Harry grunted in pain and dropped to the ground to avoid another kick, immediately rolling backwards to regain his feet. Now thoroughly enraged, the hippogriff screeched wildly and pressed its attack at Harry, who again moved to shield his sister.

"HARRY!" Row screamed. "HARRY, NO!"

Buckbeak charged again as Harry tried to back away, and he reacted on pure instinct. Rolling under the first kick, Harry spun up into a crouch and summoned Gryffindor's sword, slashing it upwards across

his body and slicing through the tendons on the hippogriffs right front leg. As the animal began to fall, he reversed the blade and cut horizontally, opening a vicious gash along the edge of the beast's underbelly. As Buckbeak collapsed with an anguished cry, Harry spun the blade in front of him defensively and stepped smoothly to the side so that he was once again between the beast and Row. As he examined the hippogriff now thrashing about in agony, he realized that the entire hall had gone silent. It took him a moment to realize that not only had he just cut up a wild hippogriff, but he had done so with a sword that he apparently conjured instantaneously without a wand. The fact that said sword was currently covered in blood and being held in a threatening position by an equally bloody Harry Potter probably didn't help either.

Deciding to deal with that later, Harry retrieved his wand before turning his attention to the dying hippogriff. The beast was stiff sniffing wildly despite its pitiful moans, and Harry could tell that the pheromones were still affecting it. In a burst of inspiration, Harry swung his wand in a small circle and cast a bubblehead charm on the injured beast as well as an air recycling charm, guaranteeing that no outside air would reach its nostrils. Immediately, Harry could tell that it was working, as the animal slowly stopped sniffing and its eyes began to lose their wild look, to be replaced by one of mixed anger and pain.

"Somebody get Hagrid!" Harry barked to the crowd. "NOW!" A number of students jumped and ran towards the nearby exit. "Is there anyone here who can cast advanced healing charms?"

"Uh, I can," a seventh year girl said cautiously.

"Can you do anything for him?" Harry asked, indicating the fallen hippogriff. "I don't want you to heal him completely, just stop the bleeding until Hagrid gets here."

"I can try," the girl said, drawing her wand and walking slowly towards them. As she approached, Harry used the incarcerous spell to bind the Hippogriffs back legs. Although the ropes certainly wouldn't hold if the Hippogriff decided to break them, they were still better than nothing.

Harry watched in silence as the older girl began to slowly work on the gash in the Hippogriff's side, but judging from the amount of blood now covering the floor, it was going to take a lot more to save the animal he'd been forced to wound.

"BEAKY! NO, BEAKY!" Harry's thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of Hagrid, who was carrying a large bag with what Harry hoped were first aid supplies.

"Hang on, do you hear me? HANG ON," Hagrid said hysterically, frantically pulling supplies out of his bag as he began to work on the injured hippogriff.

"Oh my!" Exclaimed professor McGonagall as she entered the room. Professor Flitwick followed soon after. "Is there anything we can do to help Hagrid?" Hagrid just shook his head as he continued to expertly dress and tend the hippogriff's wounds. "Very well," McGonagall said, turning her attention to Harry. "Mr. Potter, Mr. Jordan, Mr. Finnegan, and Messrs Weasley, with me. I'll have that sword, Potter." Harry held the sword for her to take, but it vanished as soon as she grasped the handle. Harry frowned and re-summoned it, once again handing it to the elderly professor.

"Sorry," he muttered. "It does that sometimes."

"I see," McGonagall replied in a choked voice. Her eyes bulged when she examined the blade closely. "It can't be," she gasped quietly.

"I'm afraid it is," Harry replied solemnly. "Are we going to your office?"

"Uh-hem," McGonagall cleared her throat to regain her composure. "No, we will take this matter directly to the headmaster. Follow me."

The group began their trek to the headmaster's office, with all the students except Harry looking like they were on their way to face a firing squad. When they finally entered the office, all the Gryffindors bowed their heads in shame.

"Would someone care to offer an explanation?" Dumbledore asked quietly, his eyes devoid of their usual twinkle.

"I-It was supposed to be a joke, sir," Lee Jordan said nervously. "That's all, it wasn't supposed to be dangerous. I-I didn't know."

"This was your doing, Mr. Jordan?"

"Well..."

"It was my idea too, sir," Seamus said bravely. "Lee and I came up with the idea together, these two had nothing to do with it." He said, motioning to the Weasley twins.

"Is that so?" Dumbledore asked, giving Seamus a piercing look. "Is this true?" He asked the Weasley twins.

"It's true it wasn't our prank," said George.

"But we did help them plan," supplied Fred.

"So we're guilty too," they said together.

"I see," Dumbledore said quietly. "And Mr. Potter? Why was it that he was targeted so specifically?"

"I-I saw him trying to remove the pheromones," Seamus said miserably. He didn't want to admit it, but something about Dumbledore just made him spill his guts. "I threw an extra vial towards him so Buckbeak would come after him." .

"You hit my sister too, you stupid git," Harry snapped, glaring at Seamus. McGonagall gasped at this admission, but Dumbledore simply nodded knowingly

"That's enough, Mr. Potter," the headmaster broke in smoothly. "I believe I have heard enough, you four may leave. Minerva, Harry, if you could stay a moment."

Harry waited patiently for the Gryffindors to leave before seating himself and sighing. This was not going to be a fun conversation.

“Well, Harry,” Dumbledore said, picking up Gryffindor’s sword gingerly. “I must admit, this is most surprising. May I ask how you came by this blade?”

“Ask him,” Harry said, gesturing towards the sorting hat. “He’s the one that gave it to me.”

For a moment Dumbledore looked confused before his face suddenly cleared in understanding.

“Of course, you used the sword to slay the basilisk. I must admit, I was rather skeptical that you used merely a piece of rock, but I was unable to deduce how else you could have done it.” His twinkle increased. “This is very interesting.”

“But Albus, the blade, is it really...”

“The blade of Godric Gryffindor himself,” Dumbledore answered matter-of-factly. “Although unless I’m very much mistaken, that label may not apply for much longer.”

“What do you mean, Albus?” McGonagall questioned.

“I mean that the blade has chosen a new master,” Dumbledore replied, turning his gaze to the green-eyed teen. “How long have you been able to control the sword, Harry?”

“Since earlier in the year,” Harry said with a sigh. With a thought, he made the blade vanish and re-appear in his hand just to prove his point. “There’s still a lot I don’t know, but it will come when I call it.”

“The blade of Godric Gryffindor chooses a Slytherin as its new master,” the headmaster chuckled. “Rather ironic, wouldn’t you say Professor?”

McGonagall was speechless, causing Dumbledore to chuckle louder.

"I, -I" she stammered. Taking a deep breath, she continued. "I don't know what to say. This is quite a bit to take in."

"Indeed it is," Dumbledore agreed. "And there is still the matter of our resident hippogriff to consider. I'm certain you acted in self defense, Harry, but the fact remains that you've caused rather grievous injury to Buckbeak. I believe it only fitting if you were to help Hagrid tend to him while he recovers."

Harry was silent for a moment before he nodded slightly. "I can accept that." McGonagall's brow furrowed slightly at the idea that he had considered not accepting it, but she said nothing. "I'd hate for Hagrid to think I wanted to hurt one of his pets anyway." His eyes narrowed. "But I can't be sorry I stopped it."

"I understand, of course," Dumbledore replied. "You were protecting both yourself and Miss Thomas. However, looking back on the situation, do you think that fighting Buckbeak as you did was the only course open to you?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," Harry answered cautiously.

"If you had not been there, or if you had been unable to fight back for some reason, what do you think would have happened today?"

"I don't know. Why?" Harry asked, confused.

"If we were to remove you from the situation and insert your brother Jack, for instance. How would the situation have played out?"

"Then both of them would have been attacked."

"Indeed they would have," Dumbledore agreed. "But would they have been harmed?"

Harry frowned. "There's no way to know that."

"Perhaps," Dumbledore acknowledged. "But you must admit that none of the other students that fell victim to Buckbeak's, erm,

advances, were any the worse for wear afterwards. The only injury they suffered was to their pride.”

“Not to be disrespectful, but so what?”

“So if it were your brother there instead of you, isn’t it quite probable that the two of them would have suffered nothing more than a slight embarrassment?”

Harry shrugged. “Probably. What’s this have to do with me?”

“There is a very popular muggle expression, Harry, ‘discretion is the better part of valor.’ In this particular instance, if you had acquiesced, so to speak, instead of fighting so desperately, the situation would have ended much more favorably. Now, I am not faulting you,” Dumbledore said quickly, forestalling Harry’s objection. “You fought to protect yourself and your sister, and you had very little time to make that decision. I do not blame you in the least. I am simply suggesting that such a decision is not always the best one. Sometimes, your purpose may be better fulfilled by exercising discretion in the face of such adversity.”

“With all due respect sir, what you’re saying doesn’t apply here,” Harry said firmly. “Sure, it’s possible that had I not acted, Row and I would have ended up fine, with nothing more than a bruised ego. But it’s also possible that she could have been seriously hurt, and that by the time I realized what was happening, it would too late to save her.” He shook his head slowly. “I’ll admit, it’s likely that we wouldn’t have been hurt. I’d go so far as to say it’s much more likely, in fact. Unfortunately, that doesn’t matter. I won’t play a game of chance with her safety, so if there is even the slightest chance that something can harm her, I will eliminate it. I regret that it was necessary for me to hurt the hippogriff, especially when it wasn’t even in control of itself, but I do not regret that I did it, and I never will.”

“Very well,” Dumbledore said, inclining his head slightly. “But regardless of this particular case, this is a matter you must consider. You hold a great power, Harry, and you use it well. However, sometimes the best use of such power is to not use it at all. I would like you to think about that.”

Harry considered the old wizard silently for a long time before he finally stood nodded.

"I'll think about it, but I don't think you're going to like the results."

"Only time will tell," Dumbledore replied as Harry made his way to the door. "Only time will tell."

A/N There we go. Not super eventful, I know, but at least Sirius is free, right? Also, a reviewer expressed concern that Lee Jordan and the rest got off without being punished for the Buckbeak incident, but that's not true. Dumbledore hasn't handed the punishment out yet, but rest assured there will be punishment. In any case, the next chapter shouldn't take anywhere near as long. Again, I apologize for the wait, and thanks for reading!

“John, move!”

“Wha- Hey!” John Camber exclaimed as he was jerked to the side by his friend’s hand. “What was that for?”

“Potter,” his friend whispered, gesturing slightly behind him where Harry Potter was currently passing by. “You were in his way.”

John scowled. “He’s not going to kill me for standing in the hall.” His only response was a questioning look that clearly said, ‘are you sure?’

Ahead of them, Harry Potter smiled inwardly. It had been two weeks since the Buckbeak incident, and Harry had to admit that in his opinion, they had easily been his best two weeks at Hogwarts.

After he had fought the hippogriff in front of almost half the school, Harry had expected at least another two weeks of awed looks and loud whispers. Although the whispers were still there, they were now so quiet that he hardly ever heard them, and while people were certainly looking at him, they immediately averted their eyes if he looked in their direction. Rather than being amazed at yet another miracle by the great Harry Potter, it seemed that the single most common student reaction to his fight with Buckbeak was fear.

He supposed that some of the reactions could be attributed to the unusually harsh punishments that had been handed out by the headmaster. All four of the students involved, Lee Jordan, Seamus Finnegan, and the Weasley twins, had been suspended for the remainder of the year and would not be allowed to take their final exams. As a result, all four would be held back and have to repeat this year of school. For what was meant to be a harmless prank, the punishment was quite severe, and sent a very clear message: don’t mess with Harry Potter.

Of course, the fact that he had single-handedly disabled a rampaging hippogriff sent a very similar message in a much more concrete manner. Although Harry knew he must have looked rather scary holding a sword while covered in hippogriff blood, it wasn’t until he talked to Tracey that he realized just how intimidating it had been.

"Was it really that bad?" Harry asked. It had been only a day since the attacks, but already he could see that people were avoiding him.

"Actually, yeah," Tracey admitted quietly. "One minute you were in trouble and the next, you were slicing it apart like it was nothing. When you stopped and spun the sword around, it looked like you were going to cut its head off. There was blood everywhere, but it didn't seem to bother you at all. You just stood there, staring, like it was completely natural for you to be cutting wild animals to pieces. You looked like a killer, Harry."

"Don't listen to her, you looked wicked," Blaise broke in. "That was probably the coolest thing I've ever seen, Potter, and it shut the Gryffs up nice and quick." He smirked. "Bet they didn't see THAT one coming."

"So now everybody is avoiding me because they're afraid?"

"Probably," Blaise admitted. "Enjoy it while it lasts, I say. I'm sure everybody will forget about it eventually anyway."

It had been two weeks, and the student body showed no signs of forgetting. Originally, Row had been worried that Harry would be upset that people were once again automatically assuming the worst in him, but that fear was allayed quickly when she realized that Harry was finally getting the one thing he wanted: peace and quiet. Even the Gryffindors were cowed, despite the fact that their beaters had been suspended the day before the match and Slytherin had won the cup. In fact, it wasn't uncommon for Harry to go an entire day without talking to anyone apart from his small group of friends. In short, it was perfect.

Or at least, it would have been, if it wasn't for the question that Dumbledore had posed in his office. Despite himself, Harry couldn't help but wonder if the headmaster's point was valid, and that Harry's own superior abilities were somehow to blame for the unusually high amount of adversity he had been faced with. Although he was sure that he was right about the hippogriff incident, something about the headmaster's words still troubled him.

If he didn't have the power he did, he never would have come to Hogwarts to rescue Ginny from the Chamber of Secrets, and Row never would have had to face the Basilisk. He wouldn't have fought Malfoy on the Hogwarts Express, and therefore wouldn't have had to deal with him later, and wouldn't have been faced with all the vicious rumors. He wouldn't have ended up on the bad side of Seamus Finnegan, who wouldn't have gone out of his way to make sure Harry was attacked by Buckbeak, and again, Row wouldn't have been put in danger. If he had never been magical at all, would his parents still be alive? Would he never have had to even meet the Dursleys?

Harry shook his head angrily. This was ridiculous! If he hadn't rescued Ginny, she would have died. If he hadn't fought Malfoy, he'd still be bullying Hermione, and probably a lot of other students as well. He thought even farther back, to when he first met Jack and Row. If he hadn't used his power then, Row would have gotten hit, maybe killed. Jack would still be taking beatings from his father, and Harry himself would most likely be dead and left in a gutter somewhere. Dumbledore was wrong. The only reason he, Jack and Row had the lives they did was because he had both the power to make a difference and the will to use it. He knew he was right, so why did Dumbledore's words still bother him?

He'd had this same argument with himself for the last two weeks, and it always ended the same way. With a frustrated sigh, he pushed those thoughts to the back of his mind as he entered the library and approached his usual table. Row looked up as he approached, and immediately he could tell that something was bothering her.

"What's wrong?" He asked, concerned.

"Sirius is here talking to Dumbledore about something," she said with a frown. "And I'm pretty sure that something is you."

Now it was Harry's turn to frown. "What makes you say that?"

"I got pulled out of charms earlier to talk to Sirius," Row replied slowly. "He asked me what happened the last time we were over at the Weasley's, and whether you got along with them very well. I told him

you didn't, but he kept asking if I thought it was possible that time was a fluke, and that you could get along well in the future. Of course, I told him no," she smiled slightly. "And he looked a little put out. Then he asked if you had any really good friends at school, so I told him that besides us," she indicated the group, "the only people you talk to are Blaise and Tracey. When I told him their last names, he looked even more put out than before, and said he had to talk to Dumbledore again."

"Not to be nosy, but why would he ask you about the Weasleys?" Asked Padma.

"I don't really know," Row answered.

"You seemed to get along with Ginny ok," Hermione said quietly. "Although she's the only member of the family I can say that about."

"Even though she does a lot more blushing than talking," Row giggled, causing Harry to roll his eyes.

"Why are we talking about the Weasley's?" Asked a confused Sarah. "Are we really that bored?"

"Hear hear!" Harry muttered as the rest of the group chuckled.

"Anyway, I just wanted you to be prepared," Row continued. "Whatever this is about, it definitely involves you."

Harry shrugged. "I'm sure I'll find out eventually."

"In the meantime, can I see your homework for Runes, Harry?" Hermione asked, reaching into her bag. "Padma and I are going to compare answers."

"Sure," Harry answered, handing her a piece of parchment. Hermione had become the unofficial moderator of their study group over the course of the year, and Harry was happy to see that she was much more assertive than she had been when they'd met. "It was pretty easy, didn't you think?"

“Yes, it was,” Hermione agreed. “But it never hurts to double check. Better safe than sorry.”

“Harry definitely agrees with you on that,” Row teased. “He’s the king of safety precautions.”

“Row...” Harry said warningly.

“What do you mean?” Asked Padma.

“Sorry, inside joke,” Row replied, shaking her head.

Padma shrugged. “Whatever.”

“You know, I still can’t believe that Dumbledore is actually teaching potions himself,” Sarah said as she finished her own homework. “It’s so different from Snape, too. I mean, I’m actually learning something...”

“Nobody could learn from that git,” Row grumbled. “You should have gotten him sacked ages ago, Harry.”

There was general agreement in the group at that statement.

“Who do you think they’ll get to teach Defense next year?” Sarah asked after a moment of silence.

“No idea,” Harry replied, scowling. “I still don’t see why Professor Lupin can’t do it.”

“You can’t be serious!” Padma shrieked, aghast. “He’s a werewolf! I can hardly believe they’re letting him finish the year!”

“Just because he’s a werewolf doesn’t make him evil, Padma,” Row said firmly. “I think he’s a great teacher.”

“That’s because you weren’t raised in the wizarding world,” Hermione broke in knowingly. “There’s a lot of anti-werewolf prejudice. In fact, most of them can’t even get wizarding jobs.”

"Which is exactly why Snape let out his secret," Harry snarled. "A nice little parting shot since he's friends with Sirius and me."

"At least Dumbledore was able to let him finish the year," Hermione said helpfully. "I heard that a lot of parents wanted him sacked immediately."

"A lot of parents wanted me expelled for pulling a sword in a crowded hall, too," Harry pointed out. "I don't care what the parents want, they're not here."

Hermione shrugged. "I guess that's true. How is Buckbeak doing, by the way?"

"He'll recover, but not fully," Harry said, a little sadly. He had been helping Hagrid tend to the injured beast since the attack, but it was clear that Buckbeak would never regain full use of his leg and would always walk with a slight hobble. "He's still afraid of me, too. I don't think he'll ever be comfortable around humans again."

"How is Hagrid taking it?"

"As well as can be expected, I'd say," Harry said thoughtfully.

"Wasn't he angry with you?" Padma asked hesitantly.

"I think he was at first, but once he heard the whole story he wasn't. He's definitely not happy with Jordan and the twins, though."

"Can you blame him?" Sarah asked quietly. "It might have been funny for the terror twins, but that was a really cruel way to use an animal."

"I agree completely," Row said darkly. "I think they should have been expelled, not just suspended."

Padma scoffed. "Dumbledore? Expulsion? Come on Row, I can't think of a single person that's been expelled since Dumbledore became headmaster."

"Well, I thought the punishment was fitting," Hermione disagreed. "Expulsion is a very big deal, after all, and I don't think the headmaster wants to ruin someone's life without a very good reason. He knows what he's doing."

"Don't count on it," Harry grumbled. There was silence for a few minutes as everybody returned to their homework.

"Harry, can I ask you something?" Padma finally asked, looking up from her book.

"Sure."

"That thing with the sword, I know Dumbledore said we shouldn't pester you about it, but I'm really curious. I've never heard of a weapon acting like that, even in really old pure-blood families. What makes the Potter family sword so special? Do you know who made it?"

Harry considered the Ravenclaw thoughtfully. His first reaction was to stick with the story that it was an old magical family heirloom, but it was obvious that Padma had already seen through the story that Dumbledore had established, so he decided to be honest. At least, as honest as he could be.

"I won't lie to you," he said quietly. "What Dumbledore said wasn't the whole story, but the important facts are true. It is an enchanted sword that I can summon at will, and it's not dangerous unless I want it to be, but more than that, I can't tell you. Some things are better left secret."

Padma looked slightly disappointed, but nodded. "I guess I understand," she said slowly, then she smiled. "Thanks for being honest."

Behind the nearest bookshelves, Daphne Greengrass scoffed silently.

There hasn't been a sword like that for hundreds of years, she thought to herself. The Potters aren't nearly old enough to have it, unless he stole it... She shook her head. Potter was talking about homework now, which didn't interest her at all. Quietly, she made her

way back to her own table and silently observed the enigma that was Harry Potter.

She scowled. That idiot Malfoy ruined everything, she thought to herself. As soon as she had heard that Malfoy had gone against her instructions and attacked the girl in Hogsmode, she knew it would be disastrous, and she wasn't wrong. Not only did Potter find out everything, but the rest of the school had as well. The Hufflepuffs that she'd spent so much time and effort riling up had, of course, apologized immediately in spineless Hufflepuff fashion, and ever since the hippogriff incident the Gryffindors were avoiding Potter like the plague. The only good thing was that Malfoy had taken all the blame for her Hufflepuff scheme, and no one knew she was involved. Hardly great news, but at least she could start over.

Her scowl deepened. She'd been hesitant to use Malfoy to begin with, but there really wasn't any other option. The Malfoys were among the richest and most aristocratic families in the wizarding world, and her mother would accept nothing less.

Thinking of her mother, she cringed. There were very few things in life that Daphne Greengrass feared, but disappointing her mother was definitely one of them. When she was younger, her teachers had asked her why she always referred to her mother so formally, never using the more affectionate 'mom' or 'mum'. The thought always made her laugh, and she'd been tempted to tell her teachers that calling her mother 'mum' would be like calling Lucifer 'Lucy,' and probably just as unpleasant.

At a very young age Daphne's mother had set out, in detail, exactly what her purpose in life was. Her father had been imprisoned for being a Death Eater shortly after she was born, leaving her mother with only a fraction of their previous family fortune and a sullied name in Wizarding society. When Voldemort fell shortly thereafter, even the other pureblood families like the Malfoys had been forced to snub them, lest they be associated with the name of a known and convicted Death Eater. Although Daphne and her mother had survived the purges that followed Voldemort's downfall, their fortune did not, and instead of being raised by a governess in a large manor,

Daphne had been raised in only a modest home; a fact that was drilled into her head from the time she turned three.

By the time she was six, Daphne was sure of only two things: she and her mother deserved much more, and it was her responsibility to get it. When she was seven, Daphne's mother sent her to a muggle park twice a week to "practice" on the other children. Instead of simply telling her daughter to make friends and have fun, Daphne's mother would pick two boys and it would be Daphne's job to make the two boys fight each other before the end of the day. If she succeeded, her mother would give her a nod. If she failed, she was locked in the basement without food or water for the night.

This is how we will live if you fail, her mother would say. You don't want that, do you?

Of course, Daphne didn't want that, and so she learned. She learned how to act meek, respectful, confident, or naïve depending on the situation. She learned how to manipulate someone's arrogance, how to play on insecurities, and how to tell people exactly what they wanted to hear. When she was ten, Daphne walked into a muggle restaurant that was a popular hangout for young teens. Within 10 minutes, she got two groups of boys kicked out for fighting and was enjoying a free meal, courtesy of the elderly manager for alerting him to the problem. She stayed for another 15 minutes to give a fake pep talk to one of the less popular boys, and walked out with free ice cream cone for her trouble. Of course, things didn't always go so well. She'd been yelled at, chased, slapped, punched, kicked, and even almost molested once. The games she played were risky, and when her plans went wrong, it was rare that she escaped without some form of retribution. Still, it was worth it. After all, it had gotten her here.

And that was the crux of the problem. After only two short years at Hogwarts, Daphne had been positive that she would have her goals accomplished by the time she graduated. She had known from the beginning that Malfoy would be key to her future plans, and truth be told, he was one of the easiest people to manipulate that she had ever met. Of course, he was also heir to one of the most wealthy and well respected families in the wizarding world, which was exactly what she needed.

Of course, Malfoy wasn't the only student that she had working for her, either willing or unwillingly, but he was the most important. Or at least, he had been, before Potter got here.

Potter. The name left a bad taste in her mouth. The boy didn't play by any of the usual rules, and he was far too powerful to leave unchecked. From the moment she saw him walk into the common room to face Malfoy, she'd known he was going to be a problem, but she had no idea how big.

It was a well-known fact in Slytherin house that if you messed with Draco Malfoy, he messed with you much worse. It seemed that every time he was embarrassed by someone, usually a Gryffindor, that person ended up completely humiliated and practically begging for mercy. What nobody else knew was that Draco Malfoy never planned his own revenge, because Daphne Greengrass did it for him, and it always worked. Until now.

Potter had embarrassed Draco, and so, as usual, Daphne had diagrammed a perfect way for him to get revenge, and for the first time, it didn't work. Not only did it not work, it was a disaster, and it had cemented Potter as someone to be feared even more than Malfoy in Slytherin house. Worse still, it made Malfoy start to doubt her planning abilities, therefore lessening her influence on him. And that, she couldn't have.

When she'd come up with the idea of bullying the Hufflepuffs, she knew it was risky to use Draco, but she needed to redeem herself, and it was the only way. She had been so sure that it would work, hell, it was working, until Draco got impatient and ruined it. The boy might be easy to manipulate, but keeping his stupidity under control was another matter entirely.

In the end, Daphne had been forced to re-evaluate the current situation in light of Potter's presence, and what she discovered was both refreshing and frightening. Refreshing because she would no longer have to work with Draco Malfoy, and frightening because she would have to play the same games with the much more dangerous Harry Potter.

It was simple, really. Potter might have slightly less money and prestige than Malfoy, but he was still independently wealthy with a good family name, and his individual fame more than made up for the prestige factor. More importantly, Daphne knew how to spot true power, and Harry Potter had it, in spades. After all, it wasn't just anybody who could fight their way out of one of her carefully laid plans. In fact, he was the first person to have done so at Hogwarts, and to be honest, the thought scared her almost as much as it excited her. Of course, Potter's almost-friendship with Zabini was a problem, or at least it would have been if Daphne wasn't sure that she had the perfect plan. Thinking back to the previous week, she smirked. Guess Malfoy was good for something after all.

"Why do you want to know?" Malfoy asked suspiciously.

"Come on Draco," Daphne scoffed. "Potter gets off and Snape gets sacked? Why?"

"He didn't get sacked," Malfoy mumbled. "Not really anyway."

"Whatever. Potter still got him Dumbledore to kick him out of the school, and I want to know why. Why is Potter so important to Dumbledore?" She looked at Malfoy seriously. "I know you and Snape talk privately in his quarters sometimes, and I know he's your godfather, so you might as well just tell me."

Malfoy looked up in surprise before his face took on a petulant expression.

"Ok, but you better not say anything," he said, then he smirked. "I've been saving this tidbit for just the right time."

"Have I ever betrayed your secrets?" She had, of course, he just didn't know about it.

"You're right. Ok, here's the thing," Malfoy said, leaning forward. "You know Potter ran away from his relatives when he was young, and somehow ended up living with Thomas and her brother, right?" Daphne nodded. "Well, I found out a while ago from my father that

when they all filed for emancipation, their old guardians admitted to mistreating them.” At Daphne’s widening eyes, he nodded gleefully. “That’s right, and it gets better. Originally, they only admitted to some minor abuse, just enough for them to be emancipated, but Severus and my father don’t think that was it. They think Potter got beat when he was younger. Beaten by muggles! Can you believe it?”

“How long have you known this?” Daphne asked slowly, her mind in overdrive.

“I knew about the minor abuse stuff, but it wasn’t until a couple weeks ago that I found out about the rest,” Malfoy answered. “Severus thinks that Dumbledore feels responsible for putting Potter with that family, and that’s why he lets him get away with anything he wants. He doesn’t know that Severus knows, though, the old man tried to keep it from him, and that’s why he was mad.”

“This is important information, Draco,” Daphne said. “Have you thought about what you could do with this?”

“I can finally destroy Potter!” Malfoy replied gleefully. “He’ll be the laughing stock of the school once they find out he grew up abused by muggles.”

“You’re right about that,” Daphne said agreeably, inwardly cursing the blond boy’s stupidity. Leave it to Malfoy to find the most ineffective and petty use for such valuable information. “Although, it would be smartest if you waited until next year,” Daphne said carefully. “This year is almost over, and people might forget over the summer.” She put a thoughtful look. “Actually, that would be even better, because you could get it printed in the papers right before school, that way all the parents and new students would know about it before they even came to Hogwarts. You’d have the rest of the house back behind you before the train ride was even over.” She looked at Malfoy approvingly. “That’s a great idea, and all it takes is some patience. I’m impressed, Draco.”

For a moment Malfoy was confused. That hadn’t been his plan at all, but he had to admit it made sense. And if Greengrass thought that’s what he’d meant, who was he to correct her? He smirked.

"The Malfoys don't run this world for nothing," he said proudly. Daphne had to struggle not to gag.

After that, all the pieces had begun to fall into place. In hindsight, Potter showed many of the classic symptoms of an abused child. He didn't trust anyone, always exhibited very guarded posture and body language, he rarely let people touch him, and he was extremely defensive in almost any situation. Originally she'd thought he was just paranoid, but this was so much better. She diagrammed her plan carefully before writing her mother with a special request. It was going to be an interesting last day of school.

After his conversation with Row, Harry began to get a little nervous about Sirius talking to Dumbledore behind his back, and decided to do something about it. The next Hogsmade weekend was scheduled for mid-May, and Sirius had promised to meet Harry at the Three Broomsticks for lunch to discuss their future plans.

Harry arrived early and took a seat at a secluded table near the back, throwing up a silencing charm for good measure.

"Hey kiddo," Sirius said when he arrived. "Why are you all the way back here? You can't even see the girls at the bar," he gave Harry a suggestive wink.

"I didn't want to be overheard," Harry replied, ignoring the innuendo. "We need to talk, Sirius."

Sensing the seriousness of the situation, Sirius fidgeted slightly as he sat down. "About what?"

"About what you've been coming to Hogwarts to talk to Dumbledore about," Harry said bluntly. "And about why you asked Row how I felt about the Weasleys, but didn't bother asking me."

Sirius's shoulders slumped. "I didn't want to bother you...." He began hesitantly.

"Bother me. Please." Harry said earnestly. "What are you talking to Dumbledore about?"

"He worries about you, Harry," Sirius replied honestly. "He just wants to make sure that you're happy-"

"That's bollocks, and you know it," Harry replied firmly. "He wants you to do something for him, something involving me. What is it? Where does he want you to send me, Sirius? What does he want you to do?"

"It's nothing, really," Sirius mumbled. "He just wants you to make friends, play around, and have some fun. You know, act your age, instead of acting mine." Sirius said, looking at Harry pleadingly.

Harry sighed. "Sirius, we've been over this. I'm not a kid; you should know that better than anybody. I don't know what he's told you about how I grew up," if the dark look entering Sirius eyes was any indication, it was a lot. "but I had to grow up fast, so I did, and I can't change that. I am who I am, Sirius, and that's not going to change. Personally, I don't care if Dumbledore ever accepts that, because I'll never trust him anyway. But you," Harry looked at Sirius earnestly. "I need you to understand, Sirius. I'm not a child, and I never will be. I've seen and done things that no child should ever have to do, and it's made me whom I am today, for better or for worse. I don't need somebody to help me regain a childhood I never had, Sirius, no matter what Dumbledore says."

"But don't you see, Harry, that's exactly what I'm talking about. No 13 year old should talk like that, it's just not right! I'm not trying to make you relive a childhood that wasn't there, I'm trying to give you a childhood starting now! Don't you see the difference?"

"You're starting to sound a lot like Dumbledore," Harry said suspiciously. "And I don't like it."

"I know what I said before, about being confused about Dumbledore," Sirius admitted quietly. "But he's been really helpful to me since he learned the truth, and if there's one thing I know, it's that he would never do anything to hurt you, Harry. He only wants what's best, and

he's a lot smarter than I am, so who am I to say he's wrong and I'm right? He's known you longer, after all."

"He doesn't know me at all!" Harry snapped. "And he never will. Do you know why? Because he's too busy trying to turn me into the person that he thinks I should be to realize who I actually am. Oh, he's smart, I'll give you that, but just because he sounds like he knows what he's talking about all the time, doesn't mean he actually does. Remember, he left you in Azkaban and sent me to the Dursleys. He's not perfect, Sirius. Pretty damn far from it, in fact." Harry took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "We've had this conversation before."

"I just want to do right by you, Harry," Sirius said miserably. "I don't know the first thing about being a guardian, I know that. I just..." He paused and took a deep breath. "I just don't want to screw this up." He finished quietly.

"Then just be honest with me, Sirius," Harry replied. "Be honest with all of us. If something is bothering you, talk to us about it. We've been on our own for a long time, and we've never had a problem. The only way you can screw this up is to start making high-handed decisions without talking to us about them." Harry paused and the two sat in silence for a moment while Sirius digested what he'd said. "Now, you want to tell me why you were asking Row about the Weasleys?"

Sirius seemed to struggle with himself for a moment before coming to a decision.

"Eventually, I'll be going back to work," he answered slowly. "And Dumbledore thought that it would be better for you and Row if you had somewhere to go so that you didn't have to fend for yourselves all day. Besides Remus, Arthur and Molly are about the only old friends of mine that are still around, so Dumbledore suggested I ask them, but-"

He was interrupted by Harry's frustrated groan.

"Why? Can you tell me that? Why the Weasleys? What is it about that family that makes them so all-important that Dumbledore is constantly

manufacturing reasons to send me there? Do you know why? If you do, will you please, please tell me?"

"They're a good group," Sirius said defensively. "Arthur and Molly are good people. Dumbledore trusts them, and so do I."

"Are they the only good people in the world?" Harry pressed. "Are they the only wizards in the entire country that meet some strange set of 'good people' criteria? Because, from where I'm sitting, everything about them seems spectacularly ordinary except for their hair."

"What's your problem with them, anyway?" Sirius asked irritably.

"I don't have a problem with them, they have a problem with me," Harry sighed, exasperated. "Their daughter looks at me like I should be on the cover of a romance novel, Ronald thinks I'm the antichrist, the twins try to put me in dangerous situations for their amusement, and their mother watches me like I'm going to infect her precious children with my evil Slytherin touch." He shook his head. "Of course, they know this too, and so does Dumbledore, which brings me back to my original question. Why the Weasleys?"

"They weren't the only family he suggested," Sirius said defensively. "He mentioned quite a few, in fact."

"Then why did you ask Row about the Weasleys?"

"Well, because I know the most about them, and Arthur and I fought together before I went away. I knew you'd met them all before and I wanted to know how it went." He said miserably. "You really don't get along with any of them?"

"Maybe if they would stop trying to prank me I would," Harry said sarcastically. "As it is, forcing me to fight a wild hippogriff to protect my sister from being sexually assaulted isn't exactly the way into my good graces. The next time I see them they're going to learn that pretty quickly."

"You know that wasn't their idea."

“They helped. They’re guilty. Next.”

“Ok, it doesn’t have to be the Weasleys, but Harry, you need some friends your own age!” Sirius said pleadingly. “You need more than just Row and her friends, you need your own group.”

“You mean like the marauders?” Harry asked quietly. “Is that what you mean, Sirius?”

“Well, why not?” Sirius said defensively. “I had the best years of my life at Hogwarts. Running around with Moony and your dad, breaking rules, playing pranks, and chasing girls. Is it wrong for me to want the same for you?”

“It is if the same thing isn’t what I want at all,” Harry countered. “I don’t make friends easily, Sirius, it takes a long time. I might have made a couple this year, but it’s too soon to tell, and you trying to rush it won’t make it any better. In fact, it will only make it worse.” He looked the older man in the eye. “So now why don’t you tell me why Dumbledore is pressing for you to send me to some other family?”

“Because it really is the best thing for you, Harry,” Sirius said with a sigh. “At least right now. I was just trying to think of someone that I would trust to take care of you and your sister. I know-”

“For the last time, Sirius,” said an exasperated Harry. “We don’t need anyone to take care of us!”

Sirius shuffled uncomfortably. “Well, I think it would be better if you did.” He mumbled.

Harry groaned in frustration and ran his hand through his hair as he tried to think of a way to persuade Sirius to change his mind.

“Are you sure about going back to work so soon?” He finally asked. “If you didn’t, that would solve the problem right there.”

“Well, Dumbledore had a few ideas for me,” Sirius began, and Harry resisted the urge to snarl. “And some of them sound pretty good.”

“Look, I understand that you want me to make friends and play nice, but Sirius, that’s just not me,” Harry said with a touch of annoyance. “We’ve only just started to get to know each other, and now you want to ship me off to a family that hates me so that you can take Dumbledore up on some job offer?” Sirius eyes widened and he started to object, but Harry stopped him. If guilt was the only thing he could use, then he would use it. “Don’t you think it would be better if you spent the summer with us? We’ve got plenty of money, and you’ve never really gotten a chance to get to know Jack and Row. We spent some time talking in the plan B house, but other than that we don’t really know each other either. Why are you so anxious to leave now that we finally have that chance?”

For a moment, Sirius looked absolutely horrified, before quickly moving to engulf Harry in a hug. Harry had to stop himself from twisting viciously out of it.

“The last thing I ever want to do is send you away, Harry,” Sirius said tearfully.

“Then don’t,” Harry said simply, pulling away from the hug. “Stay, get to know us, and maybe you’ll finally understand what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

Although he still looked slightly unsure, Sirius nodded and managed a small smile. “I’ll try.”

Harry sighed as the conversation moved on to much lighter topics, but he was still troubled. He had been sure that Sirius would side with him over Dumbledore on matters like these, especially given what he’d said about the headmaster when Harry was still in the hospital. The fact that he was now relying solely on the old man’s advice was disconcerting, especially since Sirius was now his legal guardian. And there was still the matter of Dumbledore’s unhealthy obsession with the Weasleys. What could the headmaster have possibly told Sirius that would make him suddenly want to send Harry somewhere his guardian specifically knew he didn’t want to go? Harry sighed inwardly and turned his attention back to the conversation. He was sure he hadn’t heard the last of this.

A few days after his meeting with Harry, Sirius scheduled another meeting with Dumbledore.

"Come in, Sirius," Dumbledore called when he knocked. "How are things between you and young Harry?"

"Actually headmaster, they're not so good," Sirius replied slowly, taking a seat in front of the large desk.

"Please Sirius, we are friends now, call me Albus," Dumbledore replied. "Now, what seems to be the problem?"

"Well, he confronted me about talking to you last weekend," Sirius began hesitantly. "He wanted to know what we were talking about, and why I had asked Row about how he got along with the Weasleys."

"And did you tell him?"

Sirius nodded. "I did, and he got pretty upset, saying I should talk to him about these things, not you."

"Of course," Dumbledore said knowingly. "As I've told you before, he is a fiercely independent individual, Sirius."

"I know, and I know you think he needs to open up, but after what he told me, I can't just ship him off to the Burrow."

"I understand," Dumbledore said kindly. "Young Harry has had his share of disagreement with the Weasley children this year. Perhaps Amos and Pricilla would be a better choice? Harry seemed to take quite well to them before."

"Well, we didn't actually get that far," Sirius admitted quietly. "Harry said that he would rather I stayed at home for a while so we could all get to know each other, and that maybe I would learn to understand him better."

"An excellent suggestion," Dumbledore said carefully. "I was going to suggest something like that myself, in fact. It is important for Harry to have a guardian that he can respect and trust, Sirius. I would trust no one else with the job," he gave Sirius a small smile. "Of course," he continued after a short pause. "It is equally important that Harry develop friendships with children his own age, as we have said before."

"But, what if it just takes him longer than normal to make friends?" Sirius protested. "What if we're really hurting him by trying to force him into situations that will make him uncomfortable?"

"That is possible, of course," Dumbledore admitted. "However, it is also important that he develops friendships with the right sort of people, wouldn't you agree? Harry is a powerful young man, Sirius, it wouldn't do for him to choose friends who would use him to achieve their own ends."

"Like Zabini," Sirius growled. Dumbledore nodded sagely.

"Precisely. I myself am unable to interfere as headmaster, but I must admit to being more than a little concerned about Harry's association with him and Miss Davis."

"How did he get sorted into Slytherin anyway," Sirius said miserably, slumping into his chair. "I thought I'd gotten over it, and that it wasn't a big deal, but now I'm not so sure." He exhaled heavily. "I'm so confused."

"Of course you are, dear boy," Dumbledore replied sympathetically. "It is quite understandable for someone in your position. But you mustn't let your confusion get in the way of your responsibility to Harry."

"It's just," Sirius began, but trailed off. He took a deep breath before continuing. "It's just that he seems so mature already that I don't really know what to tell him. When I'm in here it's easy to think of him as a 13 year old boy, but when I'm talking to him, I feel like he's older than I am." He shook his head. "I feel like I'm telling him who he can

and can't be friends with, and I hate that. I hated it when my mother did it to me, and look what happened with that!"

"This is a very different situation, Sirius, and you know it" Dumbledore said sternly. "Harry is not an ordinary rebellious teenager, nor is he hanging out with the 'wrong crowd' for personal amusement or out of spite, as you were," Sirius grinned slightly. "Rather, he is a child who thinks he is not a child, and who believes he is capable of making all his own decisions."

"But what if he is?" Sirius couldn't help but wonder.

"Whether he is capable is not the issue," Dumbledore continued patiently. "The issue is that he should no longer have to bear that responsibility now that you are his guardian. Right now, he feels as if everything in his and Miss Thomas's life is his responsibility alone. If we can remove that burden from his shoulders, we will finally see what a 13 year old Harry Potter should look like. That is our mission, Sirius, and it is truly the best thing for him. Don't you agree?"

Sirius sat in silence for a long moment, deep in thought. When he looked up, the headmaster could see the silent war raging in his mind, and decided to give his side a push.

"After all, Mr. Potter has shown himself to be a truly brave and courageous young man, which has made me wonder on more than one occasion why he wasn't sorted into Gryffindor." At this, Sirius looked up sharply. "I believe that the burdens he carries have caused him to be much more suspicious and cynical than he would be otherwise; both very Slytherin traits." Dumbledore looked down sadly. "I can only wonder how things would be different if I had made a better decision all those years ago, and those burdens had never become his to bear."

"You think he'd be a Gryffindor?"

"I cannot know for certain, of course," Dumbledore said slowly. "But yes, I think he would."

The two were silent after that, each engaged in their own thoughts about the not-so-young Harry Potter.

The last weeks of term went by quickly for Harry, and before he knew it exams were upon him. Of course, this meant little for him, having mastered the majority of his coursework far in advance, but it did mean that he had to spend more time helping Row and her friends prepare, which he found he didn't really mind.

As it was, the exams were as easy as he expected, and it wasn't long before he was once more seated with Row on the Hogwarts Express.

"Looking forward to the summer, Harry?" Hermione asked as she took a seat next to Row.

"Actually, yes," Harry replied, startling her.

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Sirius rented us a place right in Diagon Alley right next to one of the exits into muggle London, and I'm looking forward to living there."

"It's really nice," Row put in. "Big rooms, high ceilings, you name it."

"Must be expensive."

"I'm sure it wasn't cheap," Row said wryly. "But he can afford it. It's the ministry's money, after all."

"I guess that's true," Hermione said with a chuckle. "Still, won't it be a little strange living with an adult after all this time?"

Row shifted uncomfortably and looked at Harry, who sighed. "The short answer is yes, although hopefully we'll be able to work everything out between us."

“At least Sirius is friendly,” Hermione continued. “And he doesn’t try to act like he’s your father.” She grimaced. “My aunt is on her second husband and he orders my cousin around like he’s her dad, and she hates it. So I guess it could be worse.”

“Honestly, I’m not that worried,” Harry said. “This is the first time I can remember that we don’t have to hide anything. I’m not hiding from Dumbledore, Jack doesn’t have to act older, we don’t have to lie to our landlord, nothing. For the first time, everything is nice and legal. It’s a good feeling.”

“I guess that’s true,” Row said with a smile. “In any case, it should be an interesting summer. No,” her smile widened. “The best summer ever!”

Harry could only grin and nod at his sister’s amusement as Padma entered the compartment followed by Sarah and the train began to move.

“Who’s for exploding snap?” Padma asked, taking out a pack of cards. “Harry?”

“You know what? Why not,” Harry said, turning towards the rest of the group.

“Really?” Padma was surprised. “I was just joking, you never play!”

Harry shrugged. “First time for everything.”

The rest of the group laughed and made room for him as they settled in for the long ride.

Despite his novice status, Harry found the game relatively easy to play, and had to admit he was enjoying himself. As a result, the ride passed rather quickly, and before he knew it they had arrived at King’s Cross.

“You have everything?” Harry asked Row as they stepped off the train. She nodded. “Ok, Sirius and Jack should be just ahead.” He

started to walk behind Row when he someone bumped into him from behind.

“S-Sorry,” Daphne Greengrass said in a quavering voice. “I d-did-dn’t s-see you.” Looking more closely, Harry could see that she was shivering and her eyes were darting around the platform fearfully.

“Are you ok?” He asked her, concerned despite himself. She looked at him wide-eyed for a moment before shaking her head violently. It looked like she was about to say something when she suddenly gasped in pain and a slender hand clamped down on her shoulder violently.

“What are you doing standing around?” A voice hissed. “Do you know how long I’ve been waiting? You’re going to be very sorry when we get home.” Daphne cringed and seemed to shrink into herself, whimpering slightly as the hand squeezed harder. Turning, Harry could see that the hand belonged to a woman who he supposed must be Daphne’s mother, although she looked much younger than she should.

“What are you staring at?” She snapped at Harry. “Come girl.” She dug her nails into Daphne’s shoulder painfully and pulled her away from the crowd.

“Go with Hermione and Padma,” Harry said to Row, motioning the girls over.

“What? Why?” Row asked, confused.

“I’ll meet up with you in a minute, just go.”

Row continued to look at him suspiciously, but complied, and Harry slipped off in the same direction that Daphne had gone, pausing briefly to make himself invisible.

It didn’t take him long to spot her in an empty hallway, still being dragged along by her mother’s vice grip. As he followed quietly, Harry felt a strange sensation for a moment, but it vanished quickly, and he turned his attention back to the women in front of him. Just as he did

so, Daphne let out a loud cry as she stumbled and banged her knee on the ground, dropping her trunk in the process.

“Idiot girl!” Her mother snarled, backhanding her forcefully. “Get up! NOW!” She gave the girl another backhand before pulling her up by her hair and pulling her wand. “If you don’t hurry up, I swear you’ll taste the cruciatus right here on the platform,” she whispered just loud enough for Harry to hear. “Morsus.” Daphne gasped as the curse made contact, and nearly fell again. “Now move!”

Daphne tried to keep up with her mother’s pace, but it wasn’t long before she stumbled again, landing in a heap on the ground.

“Worthless child,” her mother snarled, kicking her in the ribs. “I warned you.” She took her wand out and leveled it at the young girl with a malevolent smirk. “Cr-”

“That’s enough!” Harry barked, dispelling his invisibility and dashing from his hiding place towards the two. The older woman snarled and leveled her wand at Harry, but he had already closed the distance between them. Sidestepping smoothly, he grabbed the woman by her wrist and twisted, eliciting a cry of pain as she fell to her knees and dropped her wand. Harry was about to simply stun her when he realized that he was forbidden from using his wand outside of school, and wandless magic was certainly out of the question. With a frown, he twisted his body slightly before releasing his captive, stepping quickly to his right to retrieve the fallen wand.

“Who the hell are you?” The woman, Mrs. Greengrass, spat.

“I’ll ask the questions here,” Harry answered, eyeing the woman coldly.

“Why you insolent little-” Her mouth kept moving but no sound came out. Harry looked down at the woman’s wand in satisfaction. He hadn’t been certain that the spell would work with another wand, but it didn’t appear to be a problem. Without another thought, he stunned her and turned his attention to Daphne.

The younger Greengrass, meanwhile, was looking at Harry with wide eyes, as if she couldn't believe what had just happened.

"How did you know?" She asked slowly, motioning to herself and her mother.

"I could tell something was wrong on the platform," Harry answered quietly, observing the battered girl in front of him. "How long has this been going on?"

For a moment, it appeared that Daphne wasn't going to answer him. Then suddenly she broke down crying and threw herself into his arms, sobbing.

"It's always been like this!" She wailed pitifully. "Always! Every summer I have to go back and I hate it, I hate her!" Harry did his best to comfort the crying girl, but he wasn't exactly sure what to do.

"Have you told anyone?"

"No! I can't! She'll hurt me even worse, I tried!" Daphne cried fearfully. She pulled back from Harry and looked at him wildly. "I can't go back there, I can't! She'll kill me!"

"You're not going back there," Harry said firmly, grabbing Daphne's trunk with one hand and holding her with the other. "Come with me."

Daphne followed after Harry like a meek puppy through the throngs of Hogwarts parents until they finally reached Sirius, Jack, and Row.

"There you are!" Sirius said when he saw Harry. "Where have you-" He stopped abruptly when he spied Daphne. "Who is this?"

"Sirius Black, Daphne Greengrass," Harry said, motioning for them to shake hands. "Daphne is coming home with us for a while, Sirius. I just saw her mother hitting her on the platform, and it looks like it's been going on for some time."

"What? Are you serious?" Sirius asked, aghast. Daphne nodded mutely.

"She's definitely coming with us then," Jack said, his expression darkening. He looked at Daphne and his expression cleared. "Come on, you'll be safe with us," he said softly, taking Daphne by the arm. Harry nodded and picked up both his and Daphne's trunks and made to follow.

"I'm going to make a floo call, stay right here and don't move," Sirius said as they started walking. The rest of the group nodded moved to stand against the nearest wall. They stood in silence for a while until Sirius returned, followed by two other men that identified themselves as aurors.

"Daphne?" One of the men asked quietly. "We're going to ask you to come with us, is that ok with you?"

"Where are you going to take her?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"We have specialists for this type of thing," one of the aurors assured him. "She'll be well taken care of."

Harry nodded at the man before turning his attention back to Daphne. "You know you don't have to go if you don't want to." He said reassuringly.

"N-No, it's ok, I'll go," Daphne said quietly, but looked unsure.

"Are you sure?" Harry asked with a frown.

"T-They won't send me back, will they?" Daphne asked in a small voice. "Maybe you could check on me?"

Harry considered her thoughtfully for a moment before coming to a decision.

"Can you give us a minute?" He asked the aurors, who nodded and backed out of earshot. When they had, Harry reaching into his pocket and pulled out the messenger he shared with Sirius before handing it to Daphne.

"You know what this is?" Has asked, Daphne nodded. "If they try to send you back and something goes wrong, or if you just need somebody to talk to, use it and I'll be on the other end. I'll come get you myself if I have to."

Daphne gave him a small nod and began to slowly back away. Harry watched her go with a frown, his mind spinning with what he had just promised. He could almost hear Blaise calling him an idiot for wanting to help Daphne, but what else could he do? He certainly couldn't leave in her in the hands of that woman. As he watched her disappear around the corner, Harry shook his head before turning back to Sirius, who was looking at him questioningly.

"I'll tell you later." He told his godfather, who shrugged and nodded as they made their way outside the platform.

Behind them, the two aurors that were escorting Daphne were debating the quickest way to get her to auror headquarters. Deciding on floo, they led her slowly towards the nearest fireplace in silence, completely missing the victorious smirk slowly growing on her face.

A/N Well, that's the end of third year, hope you enjoyed it. Next chapter will be Harry's summer vacation in Diagon Alley and all the good stuff that comes with it. Thanks for reading!

"Have either of you guys seen Sirius today?" Asked Jack as he walked out of his room. It was three weeks into summer vacation, and overall it had been a very relaxing time for the three siblings.

"He said he had some things to do," Row replied from behind a book. "I'm sure he'll be back later, though."

Jack just grunted noncommittally and turned to watch as Harry carefully arranged a number of small objects around him.

"What's he doing?" Jack whispered to his sister.

"It's a ward, or at least it will be, if he gets it right." Abruptly there was a series of flashes from the objects and Harry looked up with a satisfied smile.

"Did it work?" Row asked eagerly.

Harry shrugged. "Only one way to find out. Jack, walk over here."

"Alright," Jack grumbled as he got up and approached Harry. "But if this turns me into a frog or something, I'll..." The next thing Jack knew, he was standing in the hallway leading to his room, completely the opposite direction that he had been walking in. "Hang on, what just happened?"

Row giggled. "It's a confundus ward, it's meant to make people confused and direct them away from something. I'd say it worked."

"Did I walk over here, or did it teleport me?" Jack asked, still confused.

"No, you definitely walked."

"Huh," Jack looked skeptical, but finally shrugged. "Guess it worked then. What are you gonna do with it?"

"Nothing," Harry answered. His face took on a look of concentration and suddenly there was a bright flash from directly in front of him accompanied by a cracking sound. "I just broke it. It was really just for practice anyway." With another wave, the stones collected

themselves and flew into a small box, which Harry banished back to his room. "What time is it, anyway?"

"Half past," Jack answered. "Why?"

"I'm supposed to meet Blaise at noon," Harry said with a sigh. "Probably wants to talk about the thing with Daphne."

"He really doesn't like her, huh?" Row mused. "Do you know why?"

"I think their families have a history," Harry replied with a shrug. "Whatever it is, he says I can't trust her, no matter what."

"He sounds almost as paranoid as you," Row teased. "What do you think?"

Harry frowned. "I don't know what to think. She's been one of Malfoy's idiot cronies all year, but after what I saw on the platform, I can't just leave her. It's confusing."

"Wait," Jack broke in with a confused look. "I don't get it. Can't you read her mind and find out what she's really thinking like you did with Sirius?"

Harry shook his head ruefully. "I wish. Unfortunately, most of the pureblood families teach their children about occlumency, and hers is the strongest out of all the students I've seen."

"If you think about it, it makes sense," Row broke in knowingly. "Legilimens are extremely rare, but there have to be some out there. Wizarding politics is all about furthering hidden agendas, so anyone who could find out what a guy like Lucius Malfoy is really after would become powerful awfully quick." Her expression darkened. "Occlumency helps you remain calm and lie better too, and we all know how important that is to a guy like Malfoy."

"Couldn't you just, you know, overpower her?" Jack asked skeptically. "Force your way into her head?"

"I could," Harry agreed. "But not without being detected, and that's the real problem. There isn't a student in the school who is a strong enough occlumens to keep me out if I really wanted to get in, but that would mean exposing my legilimency, and I don't want to risk that."

"Why not?"

"Legilimency is something of a forbidden art," supplied Row. "Something only dark wizards can do, supposedly. It's ridiculous, of course, since Dumbledore can do it, but the fact that he's kept it hidden just shows how important it is."

"The frustrating part is that I'm almost certain I could find away around basic occlumency barriers, but I don't have anyone to practice on," said Harry before turning to his sister. "That's why I was trying to get you to practice this summer, Row."

Row shrugged. "I'll practice if you think it will help, but I still think you should be careful how often you use it, Harry."

"And you know I agree with you. In fact, I've hardly used it all this year, except the few times I really saw the need to."

"With great power comes great responsibility," Jack said sagely.

"That's from Spider Man, you great git," Row said, slapping him on the arm.

"So?"

Harry just rolled his eyes and summoned his shoes. "Alright, I'm heading out to meet Blaise. If Sirius comes back just tell him I'm having lunch with a friend."

"Will do," Row said, turning back to her book. Harry gave the room one last look before exiting the apartment building and making his way up Diagon Alley. As he approached the outdoor café Blaise had suggested, he saw that his friend was already there waiting for him.

"Ah, the hero arrives," Blaise said as he approached. "Feeling alright?"

"Yeah," Harry answered slowly as he sat down.

"You sure? Nothing strange has happened lately?"

"Alright Blaise," Harry sighed. "What is it?"

"Oh nothing much," Blaise said nonchalantly. "Just that you're making the biggest mistake of your life with Greengrass," he shrugged. "No big deal."

Harry groaned. "I thought that was it. Honestly, what did you expect me to do?"

"Mind your own business, maybe? Try to avoid a scene instead of creating one?"

"So I suppose that I really didn't see her getting beaten on the platform?" Harry said evenly. "I imagined it?"

"Or she staged it so you'd feel sorry for her," Blaise said simply. "In which case, it's working rather well, wouldn't you say?"

"That's ridiculous," Harry scowled. "You're saying that she somehow got her own mother to hurt her just on the off chance that I would be there to see it?"

"I'm not saying anything," Blaise replied casually. "At least, not anything definite. What happened on the platform may have been real or it may have been fake, the only thing I know for sure is that you can't trust her."

"So, because you say I can't trust her I should leave her to be cursed by her mother?"

Blaise laughed. "Potter, I think I know you well enough by now to know that would never happen. I'm not saying you should have left her, and I'm not saying you should completely ignore her if she asks

you for help. What I am saying is that you need to be careful around her, even if she seems weak and fragile, I assure you, she's not. I've seen her act meek before, and that's exactly what it was, an act."

"It's not like I want to be bosom buddies or anything," Harry replied sarcastically.

"Good thing," Blaise laughed. "You'd be awfully disappointed."

"What's it to you, anyway?"

"I'm the Harry Potter expert, remember?" Blaise smirked. "I have to protect my investment."

Harry snorted. "Afraid?"

"Afraid? Never," Blaise answered. "Cautious? Always. Especially around Greengrass." He shook his head ruefully. "I still can't believe you gave her a way to contact you. Has she, by the way?"

"Just once, mainly to say that she's ok and thank me," Harry replied. "She wouldn't say where she ended up, though, or what's happening with her mother."

"Nothing is happening with her mother, that much I know for sure," said Blaise. "If she'd been charged with something, I would have heard about it."

Harry frowned. "That doesn't make any sense, the aurors were there and everything."

Blaise shrugged. "She probably has enough influence to make that go away, at least the first time. If nothing else she'll be more careful in the future, especially if she had to call in some favors."

Harry's frown deepened. "That's a pretty worthless legal system."

Blaise laughed. "That's the wizarding world, I'm afraid. Corruption is the name of the game. Luckily," he smirked. "I know how to play."

Harry continued to frown, but remained silent.

“Harry?” A voice from behind startled him out of his dark thoughts, and he turned to see Cedric Diggory approaching from up the street.

“I thought that was you.” He said as he approached. When he saw Blaise, he nodded slightly. “Zabini.”

“Diggory,” Blaise returned the gesture.

“I haven’t seen you around much, Harry. Jack said you were living around here?”

“Yeah, just up the street actually,” Harry replied, indicating for Cedric to take a seat. “You wouldn’t happen to be the reason Jack came home pissed last weekend would you?”

Cedric laughed. “Guilty as charged. I told him I’d never been to a muggle pub before and he insisted we go. Apparently he knows the bartender at a few places so we didn’t have a problem. I hope I didn’t get him in trouble.”

Harry shook his head. “Sirius thought it was pretty funny, actually.”

“Do my ears deceive me?” Blaise said in mock astonishment. “The Golden Child of Hufflepuff getting himself piss drunk?”

To his surprise, Cedric just smirked. “Jealous?”

“Of a Hufflepuff? Never.”

Cedric just shrugged and turned back to Harry.

“Actually, I’m glad I ran into you, Harry. I have it on good authority that you’re one hell of a flier, and was hoping I could convince you to come out play some Quidditch.”

Harry shrugged. “I can fly, but I’m really not that good at the actual game, so if you’re talking about a league you might want somebody else.”

“Naw, it’s nothing so formal. It’s usually just a bunch of us from different teams that get together and play. It’s actually a lot of fun since we don’t stick with house teams, and I get to play with people I normally fly against.”

Harry considered that for a moment before nodding. “In that case, it sounds fun. Where do you play?”

“Pretty much wherever we can. We’ll probably get a game this weekend, if you’re interested.”

“Sure. Like I said, I’m not very good, though.”

“We’ll see about that,” Cedric said with a grin. “I’ll talk to you later.” With that, he turned continued on his way down the alley.

“I can’t believe Diggory got pissed with your brother,” Blaise said when he had gone. “He’s destroying my Hufflepuff stereotype.”

“Not surprising since you don’t know any other Hufflepuffs,” said Harry.

“I guess,” Blaise shrugged and was about to say something else when he noticed that Harry had a strange look on his face. “What?”

“There are two girls across the street that haven’t moved for a while and keep looking over here when they think we’re not looking.”

Blaise snorted. “Some of your fans?”

“Yeah, it’s probably nothing, but it makes me nervous. They’re older too, definitely out of Hogwarts, which makes it strange.”

“Older women eh?” Blaise said, turning around to get a look. “The brunette is cute, too.”

“Really? I like the blonde.”

“Gentlemen do prefer them,” Blaise said, turning back around. “Never would have pegged you as a blonde man, Potter, what with your groupies and all.”

Harry scowled. “I hate it when you call them that. They’re friends, and more importantly they’re Row’s friends.”

Blaise just grinned and shook his head. “Friends or not, every single one of them has a crush on you. Of course, since your planning to be seduced by Greengrass it really doesn’t matter, I guess.”

Now it was Harry’s turn to snort. “Seduced? Is she a succubus now?”

Blaise gave an exaggerated sigh. “It’s just a shame, that’s all. Here you could have just about any girl at Hogwarts and you’ll end up with Greengrass. I guess she’s pretty enough, but so cold. It’s sad, really.”

“Oh, sod off.”

“Seriously though,” Blaise said, losing his mirthful expression. “I know it sounds ridiculous, but I wouldn’t put it past her. I wouldn’t put anything past her, in fact.” Suddenly he laughed. “Listen to me, I sound as paranoid as you.”

“A little paranoia can be a good thing.”

“You would say that,” Blaise said, shaking his head. “Just be careful, Potter. I’d hate to see something happen to you just when you’re getting interesting, so watch your back.”

“I always do.”

As promised, Harry joined Cedric and a few other Quidditch players the following week for a pick-up game at the Jones house. Jason Jones was a recent Hogwarts graduate that had played chaser for Ravenclaw and hoped to play Quidditch professionally. Upon hearing that Harry liked to play chaser but had no training, Jason took it upon

himself to give Harry a crash course in chaser skills. As a result, Harry earned himself more than few new fans by the end of the day.

“Merlin Harry, I heard you could fly, but I didn’t know you could fly like that!” Cedric said as the group walked back towards the manor house after the game. “I thought you said you weren’t very good?”

“I wasn’t before today,” Harry replied honestly. “The first time I played my aim was terrible, but thanks to Jason it’s a lot better now.”

“Don’t look at me, all I did was give show him some basic moves and mechanics,” Jason said from in front of them.

“Well, I almost don’t want to say this, but you should definitely be on your house team,” Cedric said.

Harry shrugged. “We’ll see. Malfoy pretty much owns the team, so that probably won’t happen.” Harry looked up and saw Sirius motioning for him to come over. “Looks like Sirius wants to talk to me, I’ll see you guys later?”

“We’re going to meet up at The Broken Wand later for butterbeers, if you want,” offered Cedric with a sly grin. “Tell Jack he’s welcome to join us too.”

“Will do,” said Harry. He said a general goodbye to everyone else before making his way over to his waiting godfather, who immediately began chattering incoherently.

“..absolutely amazing!” Harry finally managed to make out. “You were incredible! Where’d you learn to fly like that?”

“I’m not really sure,” Harry admitted. “I’m just a natural, I guess.”

Sirius’s face took on a forlorn expression. “Your father was a natural flyer, too. From the minute he sat on a broom he flew like he belonged on it.” He gave Harry a wink. “He was one hell of a chaser too, you know. He’d be proud of you, Harry.”

"I'm glad," Harry answered. Truth be told, he wasn't sure what else to say. In fact, Harry had to admit that he found it slightly unnerving that talking about his parents still seemed to provoke such emotional reactions in Sirius, whereas he was never able to look at the matter with more than simple curiosity. He enjoyed the stories, sure, and it was nice to know that his parents had been good people with such loyal friends. But when everything was said and done, they were gone, and they weren't coming back. For Harry, it was just that simple.

"So, are you kids going somewhere now?" Sirius asked.

"They're heading over to The Broken Wand. I told Cedric I might meet them there." Harry said with a shrug. "I think Jack's going too, actually."

"You should go then, it'll be fun. I'm sure a couple of those girls wouldn't mind either," he said with a grin.

"I'll think about it. Are we taking the floo home?"

Sirius nodded and the two made their way to the main fireplace and flooed back home.

"Hey guys, how was the game?" Row asked as they stepped through the fireplace. She and Jack were currently stationed in front of the TV Sirius had just hooked up for them.

"Incredible, what else?" Sirius answered immediately. "Your brother single handedly won 2 out of three games, and would have won the third but Diggory got beat to the snitch."

Row quirked an eyebrow at Harry. "Is that so?"

"He's exaggerating, of course," Harry answered. "But I did do much better than last time thanks to a few pointers from Jason, and I have to admit it was fun. How was your day with Padma?"

"We had fun too," Row answered dismissively. "You know, girl stuff."

"Actually, I don't know."

“And that’s a good thing,” Sirius joked. “Trust me.”

“What she means is they spent the whole day whispering to each other and giggling,” Jack broke in without turning away from the TV.

“And you didn’t try to eavesdrop?” Sirius asked, aghast.

“Meh, I don’t like her that much,” said Jack. Row just stuck her tongue out at him and turned back to the TV.

Harry chuckled and started towards his room before stopping suddenly.

“Oh, Cedric said that he and some guys were going to The Broken Wand tonight, if you want to go.”

“Really?” Jack perked up and looked thoughtful for a moment. “Ok, thanks.”

“No prob.”

Harry took a quick shower and grabbed a snack before returning to the living room to find Row and Sirius engaged in a game of exploding snap.

“Good, Harry’s here,” Row said, dealing out an extra hand. “It’s always better with 3.”

“Just to warn you, I’m considered somewhat of a master at-” Sirius’s boast was abruptly cut off as the cards exploded in his face.

“You were saying?” Row said innocently.

“Beginners luck” Sirius grumbled, giving his cards a dirty look.

“No offense Sirius, but I think you might be in over your head here,” Harry said with a shake of his head. “When it comes to card games, Row doesn’t lose.”

“Really?”

“Yup,” Row said proudly. “Even when we were really young, I used to beat Jack at gin rummy all the time.”

“Of course, Jack isn’t exactly known for his prowess at cards either,” Harry said as the cards once again blew up in Sirius’s face.

Row laughed. “That’s true.”

“What’s true?” Jack asked as he stepped out in the living room.

“You suck at cards,” Harry said succinctly.

“That’s because we don’t play poker,” Jack said defensively. “I’m good at poker.”

“Do wizards even play poker?” Row asked Sirius.

“Of course,” Sirius said, contemplating his next move. “From what I hear it’s almost the same as muggle poker, except sometimes the cards don’t do what you tell them to.”

“How does that work?” Questioned Jack.

“Like if you try to discard a king, say. Sometimes he won’t want to go and will just come right back.”

“Sounds....interesting,” Jack said, giving Sirius a look that said it sounded anything but. “Anyway, I’m off. Don’t wait up.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Sirius answered, still thinking. Jack waved goodbye to his siblings just as Sirius finally decided what card to play. As Jack closed the door, the last thing he heard was a loud explosion and a frustrated groan from Sirius.

Jack arrived at the pub and immediately spotted Cedric and the rest of his gang in the corner and made his way over.

“So, I hear my little brother flew circles around you boys today?” He asked with a grin as he approached.

“Oy, Jack! Good to see you mate!” Cedric greeted. “I won’t lie to you, Harry’s probably the best natural flyer I’ve ever seen.”

“His technique is still pretty bad, though,” Jason said, passing Jack a butterbeer. “Not as bad as it was at first, of course.”

“Well, what do you expect? That was only the second time he’d played.”

“The second time?” Jason asked in astonishment. “I knew he didn’t have much experience, but Merlin! Where’d he learn to fly like that?”

Jack shrugged and took a drink. “He said it just comes naturally, and Sirius agrees. Supposedly his dad was the same way.”

“How’s that going by the way?” Cedric ask suddenly. “My dad seemed concerned that things weren’t going well.”

“Things are fine,” Jack said bemusedly. “What gave him that idea?”

“I don’t really know,” Cedric admitted. “He just asked me out of the blue if I though Harry was doing ok living with Sirius. Kinda strange, really.”

Jack snorted. “When it comes to Harry, strange is normal.”

“I suppose.”

“Hey, are we going to sit around chatting all night, or are we going to this party?” Hufflepuff chaser Adrian Stevens jumped in suddenly.

“Party?” Jack’s ears perked up.

“A few people who just graduated from Hogwarts are throwing a party at their new flat,” Cedric affirmed. “It’s walking distance, which is why we met up here.”

“Girls?”

Cedric laughed. “Don’t you have a girlfriend?”

“She understands.”

“Really?”

“Well,” Jack paused before flashing a grin. “She’ll understand if she doesn’t know.”

Cedric gave a wry chuckle and shook his head in amusement. “In that case, yes, there should be several girls there.”

“Well then,” Jack quickly downed the rest of his butterbeer and slammed the mug back on the bar. “What are we waiting for?”

A short distance away, Daphne Greengrass was beginning to think that coming to this party had been a total waste of time. She wasn’t one for parties normally, but drunk people tended to talk rather freely, and she was hoping to catch some young aristocrat after a few too many drinks. Thus far, she had been disappointed.

She’d actually considered giving up and leaving, at least until she remembered that she didn’t have anything else to do tonight. Surveying the room once more, she gave an exasperate sigh before returning to her perch with a view of the door. She hated being bored. It was just so....boring.

Unfortunately, boring had been the story of her summer. When Potter had handed her over to the aurors, she’d been worried that she had taken her act too far. That is, at least until the aurors took her directly home instead of a Ministry department. In hindsight it was silly of her to worry; her mother was nothing if not thorough, and apparently more than one member of the auror corps owed her a favor. What type of favor, Daphne didn’t care to know.

Still, with her plan for ensnaring Potter moving along glacially slow, Daphne found herself with a lot of time and nothing to do with it, so she'd taken to contacting various people just to see what she could find out. Which was how she ended up here. Bored.

Her musings were abruptly broken when the front door opened and Cedric Diggory entered. Daphne's eyebrows rose slightly in astonishment, but only for a moment. Diggory was a Hufflepuff, to be sure, but Daphne knew he wasn't the golden boy her housemates thought he was. He had helped with prank on Malfoy, after all.

Daphne considered what she could possibly use Diggory for when she caught sight of his entourage and abruptly forgot all about him. She had only met Jack Thomas once before, on the platform after her little act, but she never forgot a face. Smirking silently to herself, she slipped out of her hiding spot and moved into the crowd just behind him.

"Hey, why didn't Harry come with you?" Cedric asked Jack as Jason went to the kitchen to grab them drinks.

Jack shrugged. "Not really his style yet, I guess. He's never exactly been sociable."

"I guess that's true," Cedric chuckled. "Still, he's definitely lightened up at least a little, right?"

"Are you kidding? He's lightened up a lot," Jack said, grabbing his shot of firewhisky and shooting it. "Whew! That's some strong stuff!"

"Ogden's finest," Cedric smirked as he shot his own. He cringed slightly as the liquid burned its way into his stomach.

"So, whose party is this anyway?" Jack asked, surveying the room.

"I'm not really sure myself," Cedric admitted. "I'm sure I've met them at some point, though."

Jack shrugged. "Good enough for me. Let's meet some girls."

Daphne watched for the next hour or so as Jack and Cedric walked around the room engaging various groups of girls in conversation. Inwardly, she was impressed at the squib's confidence considering he was in a room full of wizards, and filed that information for use later. Finally, Cedric broke away to talk to another group of people as Jack made his way over to the kitchen bar. As he was pouring himself a drink, Daphne approached him from the side and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Are you Jack?" She asked timidly.

"Uh, yeah," Jack said, studying her stupidly. Finally recognition seemed to dawn and he snapped his fingers. "Hey, you're that girl from the platform, the one Harry saved!"

"Daphne," she replied shyly. "Yeah, that's me."

"Whatever happened with that, are you ok now?" Jack asked with concern.

"They didn't charge her with anything, if that's what you mean," Daphne said, looking down. "But at least they're making sure it doesn't happen again."

Jack frowned. "They didn't charge her? Why not?"

"My mother, she's rather well connected," Daphne trailed off uncertainly.

"Bollocks!" Jack snapped, slamming his hand down on the table. "I don't care what they say, if she so much as touches you again, you let Harry know and we'll take care of it."

"I, I really don't want to think about it anymore, if that's ok," Daphne said timidly. This was not where she wanted this conversation to go.

"Of course it's ok," Jack said, regaining some of his previous cheer. He gave her a wink. "It is a party, after all."

Daphne gave him what looked like a hesitant smile. "Yeah. What's that you're drinking?"

"I have no idea," Jack answered merrily. "Someone was kind enough to make up a bunch of it, whatever it is."

Daphne giggled. "You're drunk. Shouldn't you be able to handle your liquor by now?"

"What?" Jack asked, aghast. "I'll have you know I have not yet begun to drink!"

"I don't know," said Daphne, sounding unconvinced. "I bet I could drink as much as you, and I'm just a girl."

"You?" Jack scoffed. "I could drink twice as much as you, no matter what it is!"

"Really?" Daphne gave him a playful smile. "Ok then, how about we make a bet? If I can do more shots than you, you have to refer to me as mistress and do what I say for the rest of the night."

"And if I win?"

"Same deal."

Jack scratched his chin thoughtfully. "I don't exactly think you calling me mistress would be a reward."

Daphne forced a laugh at his lame joke and playfully swatted his arm. "I'd call you master, you git!"

"Ok, then you're on!"

After a little shuffling around the table, each of them grabbed a pitcher of the firewhisky concoction and sat down across from each other. They took turn doing shots until it was clear that both were quite intoxicated.

“Ugh,” Daphne groaned as she finished yet another shot. Swaying slightly, she ducked until her head was under the table and pulled a vial of sobering potion from her pocket, quickly downing it before snapping back up looking slightly unbalanced.

“That one almost did it,” she said, holding her head to make it look like she was about to lose.

“Told ya I’d win,” Jack slurred, eyeing the shot in front of him in distaste. He managed to get it down, but it was only a matter of time now, and he’d been pretty drunk before the game had even started.

It took only 2 more shots before Jack simply couldn’t get himself to do it, and reluctantly declared Daphne the winner.

“Told ya so,” Daphne slurred, acting quite drunk herself. Of course, with the potion in her she was completely sober.

“What are your orders, my mistress,” Jack asked with a sloppy bow.

Daphne laughed. “Actually, I don’t really want to move, so let’s just talk.”

“Good idea,” Jack said, laying his head on the table.

“You know, Harry really saved me that day,” Daphne said carefully. “I don’t really get to talk to him that much at school, what’s he like?”

“Ruddy amazing,” Jack said, opening his eyes slowly. “He saved my life, you know. Mine and Row’s. I love that guy.”

“Don’t you ever get worried though?” Daphne asked intently. “I mean, he’s always in some kind of danger.”

Jack laughed. “Ain’t nothing can touch Harry, magic or whatnot. He’d just – ZAP!” Jack flung his hand forward and shook it. “Blow it up or whatever. Ruddy amazing, he is.”

“He can’t be that amazing,” Daphne prodded gently. “He’s just a wizard, after all, and I heard that the thing with the sword was an illusion.”

“Pfft,” Jack scoffed. “It’s no illusion, it’s wicked old too, made by a Griffin or something.” Jack guffawed.

“Godric Gryffindor?” Daphne asked in astonishment.

“Ha! Godric!” Jack snorted. “How dumb is that? Sounds like a bad dog’s name.”

Daphne laughed with him while thinking furiously. Surely he can’t mean...

“It did look pretty wicked,” she said with a grin. Then she scowled. “But everybody talks bad about him behind his back, saying he’s evil and everything.”

“Bastards.” Jack slurred.

“Did he tell you he fought a teacher?” Daphne asked, trying to sound eager. “Professor Snape, he beat him up in Hogsmede.”

“FUCK Snape,” Jack said, sitting up abruptly. “He shoulda killed that bastard.”

“Why?”

“Why? He’s a sodding asshat, that’s why! He coulda killed him too, evil git,” Jack shook his head angrily. Suddenly he shook his head and seemed to forget what he was talking about before shooting a grin at Daphne.. “Why you want to know so much about Harry, anyway? We’re having all the fun right here!”

“Well, I just feel really grateful to him,” Daphne said slowly. “And I was hoping you could give me an idea about what he’s really like, outside of school, and I’d really like to thank him.”

"Don't even worry about it," Jack said, waving his hand wildly. "Harry's Harry, you know? He saves people, does the hero thing and all that. You try to thank him, he probably won't even know why you're doing it!" Jack laughed hard at that and slapped the table. "Probably think you're crazy or something, you know?" Jack chuckled again to himself. "But don't you worry, you need anything, you call and Harry'll be there like, POOF!" Jack snapped his fingers and then spread his hands with a flourish.

It took a moment for Daphne to realize what Jack was alluding to, but she finally did. "That's right, I heard that he can apparate," she said carefully. "That's impressive for someone so young."

Jack froze for a moment and his mirthful expression turned to one of suspicion. "He can what?"

Deciding to gamble, Daphne continued. "He can apparate," she said innocently. "I heard Professor McGonagall talking to Professor Dumbledore about how impressive it is. It's not like it's a big secret," she finished with a laugh.

"It isn't?" Jack said, clearly confused. "Well, that's a relief," he said, relaxing back into his drunken stupor. "I'm not supposed to talk about the stuff Harry can do, but if you already know, well," he shrugged and regained his smile. "It's bloody brilliant though, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is," Daphne said, trying her best to retain her innocent exterior. She was about to see what other things Jack wasn't supposed to reveal when Jack was jerked backward by a hand on his shoulder.

"What's this, Thomas? Robbing the cradle?" Cedric asked with a slight slur. "Come on, we're going to Jason's summer house, and they're coming with us," he said, jerking a thumb at a group of giggling girls.

"Well then," Jack said, standing shakily as he eyed the girls appraisingly. "Mistress, I shall have to leave you for now," he said, bowing to Daphne. "And I definitely want a rematch."

Daphne moved to protest but her words fell on deaf ears as Cedric pulled Jack away from the table and they made their way back through the crowd. Daphne made to follow but found that she had much more trouble forcing her way through the crowd than the boys did, and soon she had lost them. Swearing to herself, she reversed her direction and made her way to the fireplace just in time to see the group disappear.

With a most unladylike curse, Daphne took a seat near the fireplace and began to calm herself. Her time with Thomas had been cut short, but she'd still made some major discoveries, and established herself with Potter's brother, assuming he remembered, of course. As she considered what she'd just learned, her anger was slowly replaced with satisfaction and, strangely enough, curiosity. Daphne Greengrass was not surprised often, and yet it seemed that Harry Potter did nothing but surprise her. Not for the first time, Daphne found she was quite looking forward to September 1st.

With Harry's birthday approaching rapidly, Sirius took it upon himself to plan what he considered 'The Ultimate Party,' and set out to get Jack's help.

"Wait, a surprise party?" Jack said, interrupting Sirius's description. "Bad idea. Harry hates surprises of any type, better to just tell him about it."

"Oh, come on," Sirius said with a snort. "A little surprise party never hurt anybody, and I want to see the look on his face when everybody jumps out at him."

Jack frowned. "Harry doesn't really like crowds, either, you do know that, right?"

"I'm not inviting that many people," Sirius said defensively. "But this is my chance to really do something cool for Harry, I want it to be perfect."

With a sigh, Jack agreed to help Sirius plan the surprise party and decided he would personally tell Harry in advance. That way he could be sure that Harry wouldn't zap them all to oblivion for jumping out at him. For a moment, Jack had a vision of himself at a party talking about Harry zapping something else, but it was very hazy.

Musta been pretty drunk, he thought to himself. Oh well, probably not important.

The day before the scheduled party, Jack caught up with Harry and told him what Sirius had planned. Harry was slightly put out that Sirius had planned him a surprise party, but agreed to go along with the plan for his godfather's sake. He even managed to refrain from rolling his eyes when Sirius randomly asked him to pick up some supplies from a couple of stores in Diagon Alley, knowing it was just an excuse to get him out of the house.

Returning from the shopping trip, Harry paused outside the door to their flat and took a deep breath before finally walking in.

"SURPRISE!"

As planned, Harry dropped the bags he was holding and did his best to look surprised.

"What's all this?" He asked.

"It's your birthday party, what does it look like?" Sirius said, coming forward to usher Harry into the middle of the room. "You didn't think you'd get off without a party, did you?"

Harry just shrugged as he started to greet the multitude of guests that his godfather had invited. He frowned as he realized that Tracey and Blaise seemed to be absent, then his eyes landed on the group in the corner and he scowled fiercely.

"What are they doing here?" He hissed to his godfather, motioning towards the Weasley family.

“Harry, it’s a party,” Sirius said pleadingly. “What better way to bury the hatchet than to invite them?”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “You’re assuming I want to bury the hatchet at all. Follow me.” He politely excused himself and made his way purposefully towards the Weasleys.

He was almost there when Albus Dumbledore seemed to materialize in front of him and held out a wrapped present.

“Hello Harry, happy birthday,” he said jovially. “It certainly seems to be quite the affair. Your doing, Sirius?” The headmaster smiled.

“It’s the least I could do,” Sirius replied.

“Well, it seems to be a rather smashing success,” said Dumbledore. “Well done. Ah, Molly, Arthur, so good to see you.”

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley greeted the headmaster before greeting Harry somewhat stiffly, but he barely noticed.

“I need to speak to you,” he said to the twins. “Come with me.”

Fred and George seemed slightly disgruntled, but complied, and Harry led them out of the main room and into his room, shutting the door behind them.

“Look Potter, we don’t want to-”

“Shut up and listen,” Harry interrupted coldly. “I don’t know why Sirius invited you here, but now that you’re here, let’s get something straight. If you EVER endanger my sister again, I will bury you. I don’t care how innocent or funny you think it will be, if you want to keep breathing, you will leave her alone. Am I clear?”

“We said we were sorry for the hippogriff thing,” Fred began.

“Sorry?” Harry spat. “Now where have I heard that before? Oh yeah, ‘we’re sorry, we didn’t know the boggart would do that, it won’t happen again, we promise!’ Sound familiar?” Both twins cringed.

“This is twice now that your so-called innocent pranks have put my me or my family in serious danger, and you have exhausted my patience. If you attack us again, I guarantee it will be the last prank you ever pull. Understand?”

Both twins had paled significantly and gave identical nods.

Satisfied, Harry nodded. “Good, and don’t forget it.” With that, he turned and made his way back to the living room.

The party continued without incident for the rest of the day, and even Harry had to admit he was enjoying himself, although he spent most of the party chatting with Jack and Cedric in the corner. Even though Sirius had invited a fair number of people that Harry knew little of nothing about, he decided that he couldn’t really be angry with his godfather. The man had been locked up by himself for the last decade, after all, which made Harry realize that Sirius needed the party more than he did. At least the Weasleys had left early.

Finally, the guests began to clear out and before long Cedric, Jason, Hermione, and Padma were the only students remaining. In the kitchen, Sirius was engaged in a conversation with Lupin and the headmaster that Harry was certain involved him in some way, but found he was too exhausted to care.

“So why didn’t Zabini come?” Cedric asked as they lounged around the television.

“I don’t think Sirius invited him,” Harry said with a frown. “He’s still not completely over the fact that I’m a Slytherin, or that I have Slytherin friends.”

“He’ll come around eventually,” said Jack. “But for right now I think he still thinks of Slytherins as being like Snape.”

Jason laughed. “Oh man, I hated that git. He’s the reason I didn’t try for a NEWT in potions.”

"You're not the only one," Cedric replied. "There isn't a single Hufflepuff in his NEWT class, and there probably won't be for quite a while."

Suddenly there was a loud squeal followed by laughter from the direction of Row's room, causing the men in the living room to look at each other questioningly.

"Think we want to know?" Cedric asked.

"In this case, I think ignorance really is bliss," Jack replied, shaking his head. "Although I have to say it pains me to see my little sister starting to act like an actual girl." Suddenly he smirked. "At least I know she's safe when you're all off at school, what with Harry around."

Jason laughed. "You know, eventually you're going to have to accept the fact that your sister is growing up. I have a sister, and I know it's not easy, but something tells me Row can take care of herself. Now, don't look at me like that," Jason said, raising his hands in surrender as he found himself the recipient of two hard stares. "I'm just saying that she's going to grow up, whether you like it or not." Harry looked thoughtful but Jack continued glaring, so Jason decided to change the subject. "What about you, Harry? Got your eye on a special witch?"

Harry snorted. "Like who? Most of the girls at Hogwarts are terrified of me."

"I don't think you'll have to worry about that for too long, though," Cedric argued. "After the thing with Malfoy came out it got better. Then the hippogriff, well..." He trailed off. "Still, people have a short memory for stuff like that, especially after summer. Who knows, maybe you'll hit it off with one of the Beauxbatons girls."

"Beauxbatons?" said Harry, genuinely perplexed.

"The French school?" Asked Jason. "How would he meet one of them?"

"You guys don't know?" Cedric said, leaning forward conspiratorially. "Well, I guess I'm not supposed to know either, so you can't tell anybody I told you, ok?"

"We still don't know what you're talking about, you know," Jack said sarcastically. "And what's this about French girls?"

"Beauxbatons is a French Academy of Magic," Cedric explained. "A long time ago, students from Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang, another mainland school, would compete in a magical contest called the Tri-Wizard tournament. There were three tasks, and each contestant was scored by a panel of judges. Whoever had the highest score at the end was declared the winner, and regarded as something of a national hero. Unfortunately, the tasks were downright brutal, and a lot of students died, so they stopped doing it." Cedric paused to dramatic effect. "Until now. The schools have decided to bring back the tournament, and it's happening at Hogwarts this year."

"Sounds cool," supplied Jack. "So you get to hang with students from other schools for a whole year?"

"That's the general idea, yeah," Cedric replied.

"Why now?" Harry asked. "I mean, why did they decide to bring it back now, if it was so dangerous before?"

Cedric shrugged. "I'm not sure, really. I do know that they have a bunch of people designing the tasks to be less dangerous than before, though. My dad said that Dumbledore refused to allow Hogwarts to take part if it was too dangerous."

"So, are you gonna enter?" Jason asked Cedric. "I assume that's why your dad told you, isn't it."

Cedric nodded. "It is, and I am." Jason smiled and clapped him on the back.

"You think they'd let me come watch?" Jack asked uncertainly. "It sounds like it's going to be one hell of a show."

"I don't see why not," Cedric answered. "They'll be a lot of families and other random people there, but I'll ask my dad to be sure. I'd suggest you enter too, Harry, but they decided only to allow entrants that are over 17. Sorry."

"Fine with me," said Harry honestly. "That's about the last thing I need right now."

"Yeah, that's probably true," Cedric agreed. "And who knows, maybe with all this going on, you can finally have that quiet year you're always talking about."

Somehow, Harry doubted it.

The weeks after his birthday passed leisurely for Harry. He continued to play Quidditch with Cedric and Jason, and spent a considerable amount of time just walking around Diagon Alley with various friends that came to visit. Overall, it was exactly the sort of lazy summer that he had hoped for.

Harry's relaxed attitude did not go unnoticed by his siblings, and one afternoon Jack asked him about it.

"You know something?" He said as he and Harry sat outside Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor, "I hardly ever see you with your nose buried in a book anymore, at least not like last summer."

"You're right," Harry admitted. "I mean, I still study and practice on my own, but it's been a lot harder with Sirius around."

"You could always just tell him, you know."

"Not yet," Harry replied. "I'm still not sure exactly how he'd react. You saw how amazed he was when I told him I was reading 7th year Transfiguration material. I thought he was going to floo McGonagall on the spot just to brag."

Jack snorted. "That's true."

"I'll tell him eventually, but I don't want to dump it all on him at once, which means I can't let him see me practicing. Since I can't use my wand either, well..." He shrugged. "It's funny, if this would have happened last summer I would have been really upset, but now, it just doesn't seem like that big a deal. I feel, I don't know, safer I guess. Less apprehensive at least. Compared to our old problems, the ones we have now seem like a piece of cake."

"I think it's good for you," Jack replied. "I mean, we all had it rough, but you had it the worst. If it wasn't for you..." He trailed off. "Maybe this is fate's way of making up for everything we went through before, you ever think of it that way?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't believe in fate. I see your point though, but the way I see it, we earned this. If we hadn't worked together like we did to survive, we never would have made it here. So don't thank fate; thank yourself."

"Don't mind if I do," Jack said, taking another bite of his ice cream. "Ah, life is good."

Harry nodded in agreement and dug into his own bowl.

"Is that Sirius?" Jack asked, gesturing with his spoon. "Oy! Over here!" He called, waving his hand in the air.

"There you guys are," Sirius said as he approached. Suddenly he broke into a wide grin. "You'll never guess what I just got." He pulled a wad of shiny papers from his back pocket and waved them wildly.

"Tickets? What for?" Asked Jack.

"Only the first Quidditch World Cup to be hosted in England for over 30 years!" Sirius said, practically hopping with excitement. "Cost a bloody fortune too, but the seats should be worth it. I got one for all of us, plus a few extras, in case you want to bring friends. I got us a campsite and everything, it'll be great!"

“Sweet!” Jack exclaimed. “Ced mentioned something about it last weekend, he said it’s like a giant wizard party.”

“Yup,” Sirius affirmed. “Even people who can’t get tickets come just to enjoy the festivities.”

“When is it?” Asked Harry. “How will we get there, and where will we stay?”

“Got it all covered,” Sirius answered proudly. “Our portkey leaves Monday morning, the game is in the afternoon, and I got us a brand new wizarding tent, complete with a Jacuzzi. We’re all set.”

“A Jacuzzi in a tent?” Jack asked, mind spinning with possibilities. “How is that possible?”

“Would you believe me if I said it was magic?”

Harry snorted. “That was lame.”

“Made you laugh, didn’t it?” Said Sirius.

“At you, not with you,” Jack supplied helpfully, earning him a scowl from Sirius.

“So we leave on Monday then?” Harry asked. “We’d better get Row and decide who else we want to bring.”

Jack and Sirius agreed, and the three made their way back to the flat to fire-call Row, who promptly flooed home from Padma’s so that they could decide who to bring with them to the match.

In the end, they decided to invite Hermione, Padma, and Sarah, as they were the only three friends of the group who weren’t already going to the match. Sirius had managed to reserve a campsite close to several others however, including the Diggorys and the Weasleys. Blaise, it turned out, was also going, but doubted that he would be able to get away from his family at any point during the day. The way he described it, the Quidditch world cup was something of a ‘see and be seen’ event for him, and Harry had no wish to interfere.

Considering Sirius's opinions of his Slytherin friends, he figured it was probably for the best.

The Saturday before the match Harry was asleep when he was suddenly assaulted by flashes of a strange place and a stranger conversation.

"... closer to the fire, Wormtail..."

"... The Quidditch World Cup, My Lord?"

"... It could be done without Harry Potter, My Lord..."

"...this suggestion of abandoning the plan..."

"...But you seem so much stronger, My Lord..."

"... Harry Potter is as good as mine. It is decided..."

"... Nagini has interesting news..."

"...Do not lie to Lord Voldemort, muggle..."

"...why not? I will face you..."

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Harry awoke with a start, immediately clapping a hand to his stinging forehead and trying to determine why his scar was hurting. After a moment of examination, he realized the pain wasn't coming from the scar, but rather through it somehow. It almost felt like....

With a start, Harry began to systematically adjust his occlumency shields to block this strange intrusion. After several moments, he felt the pain in his scar lessen, and slammed his full shield into place using this new configuration. Immediately, the pain in his scar vanished and he promptly summoned a pen and paper to write down everything he could remember from his dream. When he was satisfied he had it all, he got himself a glass of water and returned to

bed, deciding to examine his findings in more detail the following morning.

When he read over his notes the next morning, Harry felt a cold ball of dread settle into his stomach. Although he only had bits and pieces of the conversation, he had enough to know what was being said. Voldemort was alive, Wormtail had found him, and they were planning something for the Quidditch World Cup. Something that apparently involved him. Considering all this, the solution was obvious: they shouldn't go to the World Cup. Sirius, however, didn't quite agree.

"Stay home, are you mad?" Sirius asked when Harry suggested it. He looked at Harry and his face softened. "Harry, I know it was a bad dream, but that's all it was. Wormtail escaped right out from under our noses, so it's only natural that it would be on your mind. I've even had a few dreams about it myself, but that's no reason to miss out on the World Cup!"

Harry shook his head. "You don't understand. It's not just a dream, Sirius. I think it has something to do with my scar, since it hurt when I woke up, but all I know for sure is that it wasn't just an ordinary dream."

"How do you know?"

Harry took a deep breath. "Because I don't dream."

Sirius looked completely baffled. "What?"

Harry sighed. "I haven't had a dream since I was very young, Sirius. I don't know if it's a result of occlumency or what, but it's the truth."

"B-But..how?"

"I used to get nightmares when I was younger...bad ones. So bad I could hardly sleep some nights, and I wanted them to stop. I remember wishing that I could take all the nightmares and fast forward through them, that way they would be over and I could get some sleep, so one night I tried it. I still don't really know how to

explain it, I think it has something to do with occlumency, but basically before I go to bed I force all the thoughts out of my mind like I'm fast forwarding, and then I sleep straight through the night without dreaming." He looked at his godfather seriously. "That's how I know this wasn't just a dream, Sirius. Because I don't have normal dreams."

"B-But you've had nightmares before, I thought..."

"I've had things that qualify as nightmares, I guess, but they only last as long as it takes me to force them out of my mind. Once that's done, I don't dream. Ever. Until last night."

The look on Sirius face was a mixture of shock, curiosity, and pity. When he finally spoke, Harry realized he should have been expecting it, but it still made him scowl.

"We should tell Dumbledore."

Despite his personal feelings on the matter, Harry had to admit that his godfather was probably right. If Voldemort really was planning something for the Quidditch World Cup, the headmaster was in a lot better position to prepare everyone for it than Harry was. That didn't mean he had to like it, though.

A quick fire-call later, Albus Dumbledore stepped though the floo and into the living room, where Harry reluctantly relayed the contents of his dream. When he had finished, Dumbledore sat back with an unreadable expression on his face.

"I'm afraid I cannot offer you a complete explanation," the headmaster began. "Since there is no precedent for surviving the killing curse, the best I can offer is my own theory." He began to stroke his beard thoughtfully. "As you know, I believe that the failed curse created a link between you and Lord Voldemort through your scar, and had the unintended consequence of transferring some of Voldemort's abilities to you, such as the use of parseltongue. However, it would appear that the link goes much deeper than anticipated, and it will likely get worse as Voldemort gains strength. It is a truly a blessing that you are already a proficient occlumens, Harry."

“What about the World Cup?” Sirius asked. “Do you really think he’ll try something there?”

Dumbledore shook his head slowly. “Voldemort is not a fool. He will know that the security forces at the World Cup are already on high alert, and would not want to risk an attack with such a low probability of success. Harry said that he only got flashes of the actual conversation, no doubt as a result of his occlumency barriers, so it is possibly that the World Cup was merely mentioned in passing.” Dumbledore paused for a moment and looked thoughtful. “Still, I will mention it to Cornelius, as well as some friends in the auror department. It cannot hurt to be too careful where Voldemort is concerned.”

“But you would say that it’s still safe for us to go, right?” Sirius asked anxiously.

“But of course,” Dumbledore smiled.

“They mentioned me by name,” Harry broke in, frowning. “They mentioned a plan, the Quidditch World Cup, and me. Don’t you think it’s a little irresponsible to just waltz in like nothing’s wrong?”

“I understand your concern, Harry, but if ever there was an unlikely target for Voldemort, it is the Quidditch World Cup. Remember, his priority is still regaining his body, and his Death Eaters are either keeping low profiles or in Azkaban. Nearly every Auror in the Ministry will be at the match, as well as Security forces from Ireland, France, and several other nations. You have nothing to worry about.”

“Besides,” said Sirius with a grin. “With you and I there, the Death Eaters wouldn’t have a chance anyway, right kiddo?”

Harry shook his head in exasperation. “You’re crazy.”

“Like a fox,” Sirius answered.

“Or like a lunatic,” Harry shot back. “I’ll go along, but I want emergency portkeys distributed to all the girls.”

"Done."

The two shook hands and Dumbledore made his way back to the floor with Sirius, leaving Harry to contemplate what lay in store for them the following day.

Much to his amazement, the day of the match passed almost completely without incident. Their guests arrived on time, they made their portkey, found their campsite, and set up camp just as Sirius had planned. Although Harry spent the afternoon subtly scanning the area for danger, he found none, and soon it was time for the actual match.

Harry spent the majority of the match the same way, always on the lookout for potential threats. He was scared for a moment when the veela mascots walked out onto the field and he felt a foreign compulsion in his mind, but a little concentration and some powerful occlumency ended that quite quickly. Of course, he still had to prevent his brother from running out onto the pitch.

As the game continued, Harry began to relax enough to follow the action, but was sure to stay alert. Suddenly he heard the crowd around him gasp and he looked up to see the two seekers diving at breakneck speed towards the ground. Harry looked to where they were going and frowned.

"There's nothing there," he said to the rest of the group. "What're they diving for?"

Sure enough, not a second later, the first seeker, Victor Krum, pulled up and skimmed along the top of the pitch. The second seeker wasn't as lucky, and plowed straight into the ground.

"What an AMAZING Wronski feint by Victor Krum!" Shouted the announcer.

"That has to be the most dangerous move I've ever seen," breathed Row.

Harry shrugged. "I thought it looked like fun." He ignored the incredulous glances he got at that and continued scanning the area.

The game finally ended when Krum caught the snitch even though his team was behind by 160 points, resulting in a loss. Harry's group cheered as the teams took a final bow and then headed back towards their campsite. As they walked, Harry began to think that Dumbledore had been right after all, and started to join in the jovial conversation.

Harry stayed up for the next several hours, engaging in conversations with many people from his group and others, until he and Sirius were the last people still awake.

"Well kiddo, what'd you think?"

"You did good, Sirius," Harry answered honestly. "Everybody had fun, and Voldemort didn't try anything, so it looks like Dumbledore was right after all."

"Yeah, it was a good day," Sirius said, inhaling deeply. "Too bad Moony couldn't come." Suddenly he snorted. "I heard Hermione say something about 'Professor Lupin' today and I couldn't help thinking how strange that sounded."

"It shouldn't, he was a good teacher."

"He always was," Sirius replied wistfully. "He was our unofficial study leader."

"That's how Hermione is for our study group, except it's pretty official."

Sirius chuckled and started to reply but was cut off by the sound of a distant explosion.

"What was that?" Harry said, instantly on his feet.

"I don't know," Sirius answered, also rising. Suddenly the two began to hear screaming, punctuated by more explosions and a large flash of green light. People started coming out of the tents around them,

including Arthur and Bill Weasley. Harry saw Arthur walk up to a Ministry Wizard who had just arrived and ask him something. Whatever the answer was couldn't have been good, because the redhead paled immediately and hurried back towards the tents.

"Arthur? What is it?" Sirius asked anxiously.

"Death Eaters," Arthur answered, visibly shaken. "They've taken the muggle family who operate the campsite and are using them for sport. You should get the children up and get to safety."

"Good idea," Sirius said, turning to do just that only to find that Harry had beat him to it.

As soon as Harry had heard Mr. Weasley's answer, he had immediately sprinted straight back to the tent. As he threw open the flap, he cast a loud canon blast charm, followed by a sonorous on himself.

"THE CAMPSITE IS UNDER ATTACK. EVERYONE, GRAB WHAT YOU NEED AND MEET OUTSIDE, DON'T FORGET YOUR PORTKEYS." As he spoke, he wandlessly opened the doors to all the private rooms and turned the lights on, walking around to make sure that everyone was up. When he was satisfied that everyone was following his orders, he made his way back outside, bumping into Sirius as his godfather ran in.

"Everyone is getting ready and will meet up outside," he said quickly, edging his way outside. "Where are the Death Eaters?"

"There," Harry looked to where Sirius was pointing and was able to make out a very large crowd surrounding a group of men in white masks. Hanging in the air above them was the muggle family they had seen on their way in, their eyes wide with terror as their bodies were expanded, shrunk, and transfigured as the crowd below laughed and jeered.

Harry had to fight down the urge to simply march over and decimate the group with blasting curses, but his family and friends took priority. As he watched, Arthur, Bill, and Charlie Weasley draw their wands

and marched grim faced towards the oncoming mob. Harry found his respect for the older Weasleys increasing.

Harry continued to monitor the mob as well as scanning the surrounding area for other threats as he waited for everyone to exit the tent. When he was sure that everyone was accounted for, he pulled out his own portkey and had everyone grab a hold.

"Sirius?" He asked when his godfather hesitated.

"I'm going to help the Ministry wizards, Harry," Sirius finally answered. "I think they need all the help they can get, and you've got things in hand here."

"Ok," Harry nodded. "Be careful. Activate."

Sirius watched as Harry and the rest of the group vanished before turning and sprinting towards the oncoming mob.

A/N Well, there we go. Summer is almost over, and Harry is starting to come out of his shell. Next chapter we get back to Hogwarts and Harry runs into a potentially very serious problem.

"I can't believe they didn't catch any of them," Row said disgustedly, tossing her morning copy of The Daily Prophet on the table.

"The mob was too big," Sirius replied sadly. "By the time we cleared most of them away, the Death Eaters had disappeared."

"What about the Dark Mark?"

Sirius frowned. "The mark was sent up from the woods outside the camping area. Nobody knows who did it, but it wasn't the Death Eaters we saw."

"It doesn't make any sense," Harry muttered. "It wasn't even a real attack."

Sirius nodded in agreement. "Most of the aurors agree with you, Harry. They said it was likely just a bit of sport for some former Death Eaters. It probably didn't have anything to do with your dream, like Professor Dumbledore said."

"What happened to the muggles?" Row asked hesitantly.

"They're all ok, luckily. Their memories were modified to make them think it was all just a casual disturbance."

"That doesn't change the problem," Harry pointed out. "There were a lot more than just the Death Eaters in the mob."

"Death Eater sympathizers," Sirius spat disgustedly, "looking for some muggle baiting. There are a significant number of them, I'm ashamed to say."

Harry and Row thought about that for a moment before Sirius changed the subject.

"But enough about that," he said, trying to sound cheerful. "Do you have everything you need for the school year?"

Harry nodded mutely and pointed to his trunk.

"That's right, I'd forgotten you had those," Sirius said sheepishly. "Will you ever need to go school shopping again?"

Jack snorted. "I doubt it, Harry's probably already bought a copy of every book in store."

Row chuckled. "That's only funny because I think he actually has."

"I still don't understand why you don't ask Dumbledore for more advanced classes, Harry," said Sirius, shaking his head. "I'm sure he'd be happy to oblige."

"Oh, give it a rest, Sirius," Jack said dismissively. "Only nerds take advanced classes, and Harry hardly needs them."

"How do you know?" Sirius asked skeptically.

Jack shot a look at Harry, who sighed. "Look, I just like to keep a low profile, that's all. I don't want to do anything that makes me stand out, and the truth is, I really don't think advanced classes would teach me that much."

"But Harry-"

"No buts. I'd really like it if you didn't tell anyone that I'm ahead of my classmates, either." At Sirius's sheepish expression, Harry groaned. "You already did, didn't you?"

"I may have mentioned something to Remus," Sirius said slowly. "I didn't mean to, it just kind of slipped out."

"So really what you're saying is that the teaching staff already knows," Harry sighed. "Just bloody perfect."

"Maybe Remus didn't tell anyone," Sirius said hopefully. Three very sarcastic looks told him how likely that scenario was. Finally he sighed. "I'm just proud of you, Harry, that's all. I know you don't like everyone knowing your business, but you've got all these great talents, and I feel like everybody should know it."

“That’s a pretty good excuse,” Jack remarked.

Harry just grunted noncommittally and wondered if the headmaster would confront him about taking advanced lessons.

“So, only one week of vacation left,” Sirius said, trying to change the subject. “Anybody want to do something special?”

As it turned out, Row did have something special in mind, and the family minus Jack spent the majority of the next week touring some of the magical sites in Ireland. Although Sirius couldn’t quite muster up the same enthusiasm as Row, he had come to see the young girl as a surrogate daughter, and found that her excitement was contagious. Harry was even able to pick up a few new books that he had never seen before at a rare book store in a remote magical community, so the trip was a success for him as well.

When September 1st finally rolled around, Sirius insisted on escorting Harry and Row all the way to the train, despite their assurances it wasn’t necessary. Harry still didn’t understand why they couldn’t simply floo to the Three Broomsticks and walk, but had long abandoned arguing the point.

“Well, I guess this is it,” Harry said when they arrived on the platform.

“For now,” Sirius said mysteriously. Harry looked at him closely and saw that he was obviously excited about something.

“What did you do, Sirius?”

“Me? Nothing!” He said innocently. “I’ll see you kids soon.”

“You mean Christmas?” Row asked, confused.

“I’ll see you soon,” Sirius repeated, grinning as he stepped back into the crowd.

“What was that about?” Row asked when he had gone.

“He’s got something planned, but I don’t know what,” Harry replied. “It sounds like he’s going to be at Hogwarts, so maybe Dumbledore gave him a job? I don’t know.” He shrugged and the two made their way onto the train and found a compartment with Hermione and Padma.

Harry spent most of his time on the train listening to Row and her friends talk about their summers, but eventually grew tired and decided to find Blaise and Tracey. He found them in a compartment with Theodore Nott and let himself in.

“What happened Potter?” Blaise said as he entered. “Get tired of all the hero worship?”

Tracey elbowed him in the ribs before smiling at Harry.

“Hi, Harry. How was your summer?”

“Pretty good, actually,” Harry admitted.

“Sorry I missed the World Cup, although considering what happened maybe I shouldn’t be.”

Harry scowled as he remembered the masked Death Eaters, and he noticed that Nott seemed to become very interested in the passing countryside. He risked a feather-light legilimency probe, but withdrew it when he encountered slight resistance. Still, judging by the boy’s reaction, someone he knew had been a part of that attack.

“Bah, nobody got hurt,” Blaise said dismissively. “It wasn’t even a real attack, just a few old Death Eaters out for a laugh. Did you see what happened when somebody sent up the Dark Mark?” He smirked. “They ran faster than the rest of us did!”

“I’ll bet it was scary, though,” Tracey said haltingly. “I heard they were blasting people’s tents with them still inside.”

“Well, like I said, nobody got hurt,” Blaise replied evenly. “It just goes to show, firewhisky isn’t always a wizard’s best friend. Although

apparently Cedric Diggory would disagree.” Harry cracked a rueful grin at that.

Tracey looked confused as opened her mouth to say something when the door to the compartment opened and Blaise’s lazy demeanor changed and he became suddenly alert. Turning slightly, Harry saw the reason as Daphne Greengrass poked her head into the compartment hesitantly.

“Uh, Harry?” She said quietly. “Can I talk to you a minute?” Blaise guffawed loudly and Tracey and Nott shot him confused looks.

“Watch out, Potter, she’s probably got a love potion on her right now,” Blaise called as Harry got up. Daphne’s gaze snapped back to Blaise and Harry saw a strange gleam in her eye for a moment, but it quickly vanished and was replaced by a hurt look.

“Why would you say something like that?” She asked. She shook her head sadly and withdrew into the hallway as Harry followed.

“What is it?” Harry asked, eyeing Daphne warily.

“Well, I never really got a chance to thank you in person,” Daphne began uncertainly. “I ran into your brother Jack this summer at a party, I’m not sure if he told you...”

Harry’s brow furrowed. “No, he didn’t.”

Good. “Well, I think he was pretty drunk, so maybe he doesn’t remember,” Daphne said quickly. “Anyway, I wanted to say thanks again, in person this time, but that’s not the only reason I wanted to talk to you.” She took a deep breath and seemed visibly nervous, which wasn’t entirely an act. “I don’t know if you know this, but Malfoy is Professor Snape’s godson, and Snape told him something over the summer, something about you. He says that Dumbledore told Snape that you ran away from your muggle relatives because they were abusing you really bad, and now he’s planning to spread it through the whole school. I just, well... I just thought you should know.”

Daphne studied Harry carefully for his reaction, but what she saw wasn't at all what she'd expected. She had thought he would be angry, ashamed maybe, and definitely upset. Instead he seemed to scowl for a moment and appeared deep in thought. Suddenly his eyes widened slightly and Daphne was surprised to see an expression she had never seen on Harry Potter: fear.

"Did he say anything else, Daphne?" Harry asked. "Anything at all?"

What is he so afraid that Malfoy knows? Daphne wondered to herself.

"No, that's all I heard," she finally answered.

Harry seemed to relax slightly at her answer, but it was clear to Daphne that something was bothering him.

"Thanks for telling me, Daphne," Harry said, still thinking. "Do you know if he's already started telling people, or is he planning some big announcement?"

"I think he's already started," Daphne answered. "You know, I actually have some friends in other houses that I could talk to, if you want. I could tell them it's just another attempt by Malfoy to make you look bad."

Harry eyed her shrewdly. "Actually, that would be great," he said slowly.

"Ok, I'll start right away," Daphne said, nodding. She started to turn away but stopped suddenly. "Look, I know Zabini doesn't trust me, and I've definitely been nasty to you before, but I'm not a bad person, Harry. I just..." She sighed. "I'm supposed to act a certain way, and be friends with certain people, you know what I mean? Sometimes I have to be mean, but that's not really me. I hope you can understand that." Without waiting for a reply, she turned and made her way back up the train. Mind racing, Harry opened the door to his compartment and sat back down.

"Well?" Blaise asked impatiently. "What'd she say?"

Harry considered his friend for a moment before turning to Nott. "Would you excuse us for a moment, Nott?" Nott looked like he was about to protest, but thought better of it at the last moment and grudgingly walked out of the compartment.

"Well, according to Daphne, Malfoy didn't learn his lesson last time, and is trying to start more rumors about me. This time he's saying that I ran away when I was younger because I was being severely abused by my relatives. Supposedly he heard about it from Snape."

"Is it true?" Blaise asked, eyeing Harry shrewdly.

"It's not like I was tortured," Harry lied. "They hated me, sure, and they certainly didn't try to hide it, but it really wasn't that bad."

"Why would Snape tell Malfoy about it then?" Blaise asked skeptically.

"Maybe Dumbledore said something?" Questioned Tracy.

"There's nothing to tell, though," Harry pointed out. "So either Snape or Malfoy must have made it up." Unless Dumbledore paid a visit to Petunia and found the block I placed on her. Harry thought to himself. This could be really bad.

"So now Malfoy will spread this around to make you look weak and ruin your reputation," Tracey said knowingly.

"I don't really care about my reputation," Harry replied absently.

"What's wrong then?" Blaise asked, studying Harry closely. "Something has you upset about this, so what is it?"

Harry shook his head. "Nothing. I can deal with Malfoy. How big a deal do you think this will be? I'd really like to keep this from being blown out of proportion, if possible."

"Well, you can bet he'll play up the fact that they were muggles," Blaise said, still looking at Harry skeptically. "It depends on how big a deal he wants to make it, and knowing Malfoy, it'll be pretty big."

Harry had to agree, and if the Daily Prophet printed the story, it was possible that Petunia would receive a visit from the aurors, and nothing good could possibly come from that.

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about it now,” Tracey said wisely. “So I guess we wait.”

Harry and Blaise only nodded and the three settled into an uncomfortable silence.

It didn’t take long for Malfoy’s rumor to make its way to their compartment, and before long Harry was once again noticing an unusually large number of people milling around in the hallway and sighed heavily. He hoped Daphne was serious about talking to people on his behalf, otherwise he was going to have to do something drastic.

When the train finally arrived at Hogsmede station, Harry disembarked and forced himself to ignore the whispering that was going on around him until they had made it all the way to the castle and he was sitting in his usual place at the Slytherin table. There, the whispers were quite a bit louder.

“So, the great Harry Potter got beat by the big bad muggles?” Came the sneering voice of Pansy Parkinson. “Oh, what a poor wittle baby!” Some of the students around her looked at Harry mockingly, but stopped when he let out a bark of laughter.

“Tell me Parkinson, even if it were true, do you think that makes me less dangerous now, or more dangerous? In fact,” he said, glaring at her coldly. “If you’ve forgotten what happens when you make me mad, I’d be happy to remind you. Who knows,” he shrugged before switching to parseltongue. --you might even enjoy it.--

That shut her up rather quickly, and brought a scowl to Malfoy’s face.

The hall was silent as the new first years entered slowly and were sorted, after which food appeared and the hall was overcome with chatter once more. Although it seemed that Harry’s little reminder had stopped most of the whispering and pointing at the Slytherin table,

the same could not be said of the rest of the tables in the Great Hall. Surprisingly, it seemed that Malfoy was getting just as many looks as Harry himself was, and they were far from friendly. As Harry surveyed the mass of students, Cedric Diggory caught his eye and gave him a questioning look, to which Harry mouthed 'later.' Nodding, Cedric returned to his food.

When most people were finished eating, Dumbledore stood up to make his start of term announcements. Just as he was about to announce the tournament, the doors to the Great Hall were thrown open, causing Harry to instinctively whirl around in his seat to face the newcomer.

Standing in the archway was a man dressed in a long, dripping cloak leaning heavily on a large wooden staff. The man paused for a moment before removing the hood obscuring his face and began walking slowly toward the head table. He moved with a heavy limp and every other step was punctuated by a loud thunk, but the students hardly noticed; they were looking at his face.

The man was so disfigured that his features could barely be called human. His entire face was covered in various scars, some crisscrossing over each other to form even larger and uglier patches of twisted skin. Yet even with all of that, it was his eyes that made the students shudder. While one was small and beady, the other was a large, electric blue sphere that spun wildly and seemed to be looking everywhere at once. Harry noticed that several of his housemates were looking at the newcomer in obvious fear, and turned to Blaise with a questioning look.

"That's Mad-Eye Moody," Blaise whispered to him. Harry was surprised at his friend's unease, having never seen Blaise anything but composed. "He's supposedly crazy now, but he used to be the best auror in the Ministry. They say that half the cells in Azkaban are full because of him."

That would explain the scars, Harry thought absently, looking back at the grizzled former auror. What it didn't explain was what he was doing in the Great Hall.

“Ah, just in time,” Dumbledore said, nodding at Moody. “May I present our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Moody.”

The hall way once again overcome with whispers, which seemed to spur Moody’s magical eye into overdrive as it spun around in its socket.

“Now, as I was saying,” Dumbledore continued as Moody took a standing position next to the head table. “There will be no Quidditch this year, as Hogwarts has been chosen to host a very exciting event that has not been held in over a century. It is my very great pleasure to inform you that the Tri-Wizard Tournament will be taking place at Hogwarts this year.”

As expected, the majority of the student body was surprised and immediately began to chatter excitedly amongst themselves. Dumbledore went on to briefly describe the history of the tournament and talk about when the other delegates were arriving, but Harry was only half listening. Instead, he was gazing incredulously at the large black dog that had come out of the antechamber and was currently sitting beside Professor McGonagall. When Dumbledore had finished talking about the tournament, he held up his hands for silence.

“Now, while not as exciting as the Tri-Wizard Tournament, I do have a few other changes to announce. First, Professor Snape has decided to devote more of his time to research, and as such will no longer be teaching first through fifth year potions.” The Gryffindor table burst into applause. “He will, however, remain the head of Slytherin house and continue to teach the NEWT classes. As such, it is my pleasure to introduce Professor Moor, who will taking over potions for first through fifth year students.” A tall, slender woman that Harry didn’t recognize stood at the far end of the table and gave a smile and a polite wave. At first glance she appeared to be in her late twenties, with medium length brown hair and friendly brown eyes. Overall, she looked quite ordinary, and Harry turned his attention back to Dumbledore.

“Also, for all of you that have dreams of becoming animagi, I am happy to announce that Professor McGonagall has agreed to take on

an assistant to teach an optional transfiguration course on the subject. May I present Assistant Professor Sirius Black!"

With a loud bark, the dog that Harry had been watching jumped over the head table before transforming back into a smiling Sirius Black. He shot a wink at Harry before taking an exaggerated bow, much to the student body's delight.

"Thank you, Professor Black," Dumbledore said, chuckling. Sirius smiled sheepishly and took a seat next to Professor McGonagall. "Now, it is already late, and your common rooms beckon. I bid you all good night."

As the students filed out of the Great Hall, Harry slipped away from the Slytherin table and approached his godfather.

"Why didn't you tell me?" He asked when he was within earshot.

"What, and ruin the surprise?" Sirius replied, grinning. "You should have seen your face when I came out as Padfoot. I guess I'm just lucky that dogs can't laugh." He chuckled again. "So, gonna take my class? I made Dumbledore agree to take fourth years and up."

"Sure," Harry replied. Although becoming an animagus was something he'd been interested in before, he had never considered it a priority. However, with his own godfather teaching the subject he saw no reason not to explore the possibility.

Sirius's face lit up at his reply. "It'll be fun, I promise," he said excitedly. "We learned loads about what not to do the last time. I'll bet we can get you transform before the end of the year!"

Harry shook his head, amused at his godfather's childlike excitement, and promised to be in attendance for the first class before heading down to the Slytherin dungeons. Walking into the common room, he spied a worried looking Tracey sitting with Blaise, who was looking very annoyed. The reason became apparent when Harry saw that Daphne Greengrass was sitting on a nearby sofa, lounging casually. Tracey looked up as Harry entered and exhaled heavily.

“Ok, he's here now,” She said to the other two. “You can stop giving each other death glares.”

“What took you so long, Potter?” Blaise said, pulling his gaze away from Daphne.

“Sirius neglected to mention that he would be teaching at Hogwarts this year, actually,” Harry replied, taking a seat in a nearby armchair. “I wanted to talk to him for a minute.”

“Good thing you got here when you did, I think Zabini was about to hex me,” Daphne said, smirking at Blaise.

“You were waiting for me?”

Daphne nodded. “I just wanted to tell you that I spoke to my friends in the other houses, and given Malfoy's track record, I don't think you have to worry about anything. If anything, it's Malfoy who should be worried.”

“That sure was nice of you,” Blaise said sarcastically.

“Oh, it was no trouble,” Daphne answered, deliberately ignoring the sarcasm. “You're welcome.”

Blaise's eyes narrowed. “Oh, come off it,” he snapped before turning to Harry. “What did she ask you for in return?”

Harry shook his head. “You won't believe me, but she didn't ask for anything.”

“You're right, I don't believe you,” Blaise snorted.

“Look Zabini,” Daphne said patiently. “I know you don't like me or my family, and maybe there's nothing I can do about that, but that doesn't mean I can't try.” She paused for a moment and her gaze flickered to Tracey. “You might find this hard to believe, but I actually admire the two of you. You stayed away from Malfoy's circle without making him an enemy, and that's impressive.”

“Do you honestly expect me to believe that?” Blaise asked incredulously. “Whatever you’re trying, it won’t work, you know.”

“I just want a chance,” Daphne replied patiently. “I stuck with Malfoy out of self-preservation, even you have to admit that much. Harry changed that, so I don’t have to hang around him anymore. Besides, it’s only natural for people to be replaced when someone better comes along.” She was looking at Harry, but threw a quick look at Blaise as she said the last part.

Blaise growled in response and Harry looked at him in astonishment. He’d never seen his cool-mannered friend quite that upset, especially over such a strange and innocuous comment. Harry looked back at Daphne curiously and wondered, not for the first time, what could have possibly happened between them to inspire such enmity.

“Well, I’m off to bed,” Daphne said finally. “Goodnight.” With one last slightly mocking look at Blaise, she turned and walked slowly toward the girls dorms.

“You really hate her, don’t you?” Harry asked when she had gone.

“Yes, I do,” Blaise said, regaining his composure.

“You don’t think there’s a chance she’s telling the truth?” Tracey asked hesitantly. “I know she’s never been big on the truth before, but what she said makes sense.”

Blaise gave Tracey a patronizing look. “Tracey, do you remember what you said about Malfoy the first time you met him? I believe your exact words were, ‘I believe him, and I think he’s kinda nice.’ Sound familiar?”

Tracey’s only response was an embarrassed flush.

“Look, we’ve been over this,” Harry interrupted. “If she’s sincere, great. If not,” he shrugged. “Oh well. Either way, I’m not planning the rest of my life around Daphne Greengrass.” Tracey giggled and even Blaise looked slightly mollified. “Now,” Harry continued. “The real

question is whether or not you two are going to take the animagus class with me, since it's open to 4th year and up."

The group spent some time talking about Sirius's class and some other random school topics before Harry finally excused himself and made his way up to the dorm. As opposed to the previous year, when Harry had been unable to create a proper ward, this time he was able to erect a basic shield ward around the outside of his bed. That done, he sealed the curtains all around and set an alarm to alert him if any spells hit his ward. Since he'd sealed the curtains magically, no one would be able to open them without a spell, and no spell could hit the actual curtains while the shield ward was in place. It wasn't Fort Knox, but it should certainly be enough to stop Draco Malfoy, and this way, Harry wouldn't be awoken every time a passing student tripped one of his proximity charms. Surveying his work, he felt a surge of pride for a job well done before promptly settling in for a good night's sleep.

Harry awoke the next morning and made his way down for his usual early breakfast. When he was finished, he saw Cedric Diggory walking into the Great Hall and got up to meet him.

"Hey, Cedric," he called as the older boy started towards his house table.

"Oh, hey Harry," Cedric said, turning around. "What's up?"

"It looked like you wanted to say something last night at dinner," Harry replied, edging away from the house tables.

Cedric frowned. "Yeah, there were some more rumors flying around about you, did you hear?" Harry nodded. "Well, I was going to talk to you about them, but then a couple of girls in my house, Susan Bones and Jessica Sanders, they starting saying that it was just another rumor started by Malfoy to make you look bad, and that we shouldn't fall for the same thing twice. I figured that was true, but still thought you should know."

"I appreciate that," Harry said honestly. "I heard about it on the train, and I was worried everyone would just assume the worst like last time."

“Well, they probably would have, but somehow Bones and Sanders found out that it was Malfoy, and once that got out, well” Cedric shrugged. “His credibility is pretty much shot after what he tried to pull last year.”

“As it should be,” Harry muttered to himself.

“That’s true,” Cedric agreed. “Well, if anybody else asks, I’ll tell them the real story. I’ll see you later.”

Harry just nodded and Cedric joined his housemates at the Hufflepuff table.

Looks like Daphne came though, Harry mused. It was still too early for class so he made his way to the library.

As expected, Harry’s first day of class was rather boring, since most teachers spent the time reviewing material that he had learned before he even came to Hogwarts. One notable exception to that was potions, where Professor Moor started the class on new material immediately, stressing the importance of proper discipline in the art of potion making. Still, despite her obvious zeal for the subject, Harry had to admit that her patient and detailed instructions were a welcome change from what had passed for teaching under Snape.

The rest of his first week classes were review as well with the exception of Defense Against the Dark Arts. Harry didn’t have Moody’s class until Wednesday, by which time every all the 4th years had heard enough rumors about the former auror to be both very excited and very nervous about his class.

Harry walked into the Defense classroom with Blaise and Tracey only to find that all the seats closest to the front were already filled with Gryffindors.

“Look at them,” Blaise snorted. “I’ll bet they lined up outside.” Tracey giggled as she took a seat next to him. Harry spotted Hermione sitting alone and moved to sit next to her. He was about to ask her a question when he Moody entered and walked slowly to the front of

the room, his wooden leg echoing loudly with each step. When he reached the front he picked up a piece of parchment and began to read out names in alphabetical order.

"Well, straight to it then," Moody said when he had finished calling role. "According to your last professor, you've done a good deal of work with dark creatures, but are practically ignorant when it comes to curses. So," he began to walk towards the shelves behind his desk. "I'm here to make sure you know what wizards can do to each other. Now, according to the Ministry of Magic, I'm supposed to teach you the countercurses and leave it at that." Moody grabbed a large glass bottle and walked back to the desk with it. "I'm not supposed to show you what illegal dark curses look like until you're in the sixth year. They don't think you can handle it until then." His eyes scanned the group of students slowly. "But Dumbledore thinks more highly of you, and I think you need to know what you're up against. **CONSTANT VIGILANCE!**" He roared, causing the entire room to jump.

"Now, the worst of all curses are the unforgivables: The Imperious Curse, The Cruciatus Curse, and The Killing Curse," Moody continued. "Who can tell me why we call them unforgivables?"

When no one raises their hand, Moody shook his head. "No one? Well, maybe this will give you an idea." He opened the jar and took out what appeared to be a large spider, which sat in the center of his desk.

"Imperio," He muttered, leveling his wand at the creature. Instantly, the spider became rigid before beginning to twist, twirl, and even tap dance, much to the delight of the class. Moody, however, wasn't amused.

"Think it's funny, do you?" He snapped. "What should I make it do next? Jump out the window? Drown itself?" The class immediately quieted and Moody removed the curse before replacing the spider in the glass jar.

"Total control," he spat, resuming his lecture. "That's what the Imperious Curse is. Complete and total domination of another human being. Still think it's funny?" He shook his head angrily. "To

successfully cast the Imperious Curse, you must have the desire to dominate, to crush any resistance of free will. It's not enough to just want the control, you have to want a slave," he spat, one eye spinning menacingly. "No conscience, no personality, nothing except what you put there. That's the Imperious curse." He glared at the class as he removed another spider from the jar. "To cast the Imperious, you have to want to destroy someone from the inside out. That's why it's unforgivable."

Moody placed the second spider on the desk and muttered an enlargement charm.

"Now, the second unforgivable. Crucio!" The enlarged spider began to twitch uncontrollably, and Harry was sure that if it had a voice, it would be screaming. Moody held his wand on it for a good ten seconds as it writhed in agony before finally releasing it and replacing it in the jar.

"Pain. Horrible, burning, life altering pain. That is the purpose of the Cruciatus Curse," Moody said menacingly. "Pain to make you give up you friends, your family. Pain to break your spirit, to make you give in, and give up." Moody regarded the class seriously. "To cast the Cruciatus Curse, you have to not only want to cause pain, you have to enjoy it." Next to Harry, Hermione let out a horrified gasp. "Anger, revenge, desire, none of these are enough. The Cruciatus is only successful when the wizard casting can revel in the suffering of the victim. That is why it is unforgivable."

Moody took the last spider out of the jar and the entire room was hit with a sense of impending doom.

"And the last," Moody said, holding the spider in the air. He closed his eyes and looked like he was concentrating heavily on something before he abruptly dropped the spider onto the desk and jabbed his wand at it viciously. "AVADA KEDAVRA!" He roared.

Even as far back as he was, Harry could feel the sheer volume of magic that had gone into the spell, and it made him shudder. It wasn't just the amount of magic, it was how twisted and wrong it felt, as if the spell itself was crying out in pain. There was a bright flash and a

loud rushing sound that Harry tried to identify by couldn't. The spider keeled over without a single mark on it, yet was unmistakably dead.

"The Killing Curse," Moody said calmly, brushing the dead spider off the desk. "The most powerful, most pure form of hatred known to wizardkind. It is unblockable, and only one person has ever survived it. And he's sitting in this room." The entire room turned to look at Harry, who looked back calmly. "Of course, the Killing Curse needs a good bit of power behind it as well. It's not enough just to hate something, you have to let that hate consume you, feed you, until there's nothing else in you. It is, quite possibly, the most evil and disgusting feeling possible." Suddenly he stopped pacing and let his magical eye spin in its socket. "But that's what you're up against. To cast the Killing Curse you have to be not only powerful, but so all-consumed with hatred that, at that moment, you are scarcely human. That is why it's unforgivable."

Moody turned and walked slowly back to the center of the room. When he looked up, he was surprised to see that a hand was raised.

"You have a question, Potter?"

"Yes sir," Harry replied. "So, if someone killed a friend of mine, and I wanted to kill him as payback, I wouldn't be able to use the killing curse?"

Moody started at him for a moment before a hideous grin split his features. "Excellent question, Potter. Five points to Slytherin." The rest of the class was still looking at Harry incredulously, amazed that he had the guts to ask the question in the first place. "The answer is, it depends," Moody continued. "The Killing Curse is hate, Potter, pure and simple. If you're thinking about revenge, or justice, or killing someone because they deserve it, the Killing Curse won't work. Sure, you might hurt 'em," he said, waving his hand dismissively. "But to cast a true killing curse, you have to twist your insides until there's nothing left but hate. That's one of the downsides to the Killing Curse; all but the darkest wizards have to gather themselves for a moment before they can cast it. If you're thinking about anything else, it won't work."

Harry thought about that for a moment before he raised his hand again.

“How is it that you are able to cast it then, sir?”

Moody paused for a moment before turning and leveling a piercing look at Harry with both his eyes.

“It’s not easy,” he finally said softly. “But when I think of all the Death Eaters that didn’t get caught, I can manage. There’s nothing in the world I hate more than a Death Eater who went free. LISTEN UP!” He suddenly barked, causing the class to jump again. “In case you missed it the first time, these curses aren’t unforgivable because of what they do. They’re unforgivable because of how you have to do it. There’s plenty of spells to control, or cause pain, or even kill. Good aurors know a dozen lethal spells, and not one of them is considered unforgivable. It’s the motivation behind these curses that makes them so powerful, and so dark. Now, write this down.”

The rest of the class was spent taking notes as Moody continued to lecture about the details of the unforgivables, and why they were so much worse than normal curses. When the bell finally rang, Harry had to admit that it had been a very informative, if rather unorthodox lecture.

“You don’t think he’ll really put the Imperious Curse on us, do you?” Tracey asked fearfully as they walked out of the classroom.

“He looked pretty serious to me,” Harry answered. “And he’s definitely the type that means what he says.”

“You can say that again,” Blaise muttered. “Definitely not the Professor to mess with.”

“Yeah, he scares me,” Tracey admitted quietly.

“Really?” Harry asked curiously. “I think I like him.”

“I like him too,” came the voice of Daphne Greengrass as she stepped up beside Harry.

Blaise snorted. "I'm sorry, were you under the impression that your opinion mattered to us?" He asked mockingly.

Daphne shrugged. "If you're too stupid to see this as an opportunity, then I guess I shouldn't bother you." She said nonchalantly. "You can't rely on other people your whole life, Zabini. Eventually you might have to actually fight for yourself."

Blaise opened his mouth to reply, but snapped it shut again when he realized that any attempt at a comeback would only make him look bad. Daphne smirked slightly and gave Harry a small wave as she broke off and headed down an adjacent hallway.

Blaise muttered a few choice expletives at her retreating back, but Harry was looking thoughtful. Something was bothering him, but he wasn't quite sure what it was.

"Where to now, Harry?" Tracey asked, breaking him out of his stupor.

"Animagus Transfiguration," Harry answered. "Time to see what kind of professor my Godfather is."

Blaise shook his head. "I can't believe you willingly signed up for an extra class, Potter."

"I would have taken it, too," Tracey said defensively, before muttering, "if my parents let me, anyway."

"Trust me, becoming an animagus is hard, and very time consuming," Blaise said confidently. "Why do you think there's so few registered animagi? If he's lucky, your Godfather will end up with 2 or 3 students who make it all the way to end."

Harry just shrugged. "Only one way to find out, I guess. I'll see you guys later." He turned and started towards Professor Black's classroom.

When he arrived he wasn't surprised to see that he was the only Slytherin 4th year that had decided to take the class. Due to the

incredible interest the class had generated, Sirius had been forced to teach 4 classes, one for each year, instead of the two that he had originally planned. Unfortunately, that interest hadn't extended to Slytherin house for some reason. Looking around, Harry spotted Hermione sitting with Padma in a crowded area near the front, and took a seat at an empty desk towards the right of the room.

"Is it safe to sit?" Asked a voice from behind him. Harry turned to see that, once again, Daphne Greengrass was walking towards him. "Or is Zabini waiting somewhere to pounce on me?"

"He's not taking the class," Harry answered. "I figured I'd be the only Slytherin here, to tell the truth." He looked at Daphne quizzically. "How did you get here, anyway?"

"I had to get something from my room and took a shortcut back up," Daphne replied, slipping gracefully into the seat next to him. "And I know for a fact we're the only two Slytherins, but I've always been interested in becoming an animagus, and this was too good a chance to pass up." She looked up to the front of the room, where Sirius was nervously shuffling random papers around on his desk. "He's your Godfather, isn't he?" Daphne asked. "That must be a little weird, him being a teacher, I mean."

Harry just shrugged. "Maybe. It's a little too early to know, though," he said shortly. He really didn't want to talk about it, and Daphne seemed to pick up on that and just nodded mutely before she began to pull her supplies out of her bag.

"Well then," Sirius said nervously. "Welcome to your first animagus class, I'm Sirius Black, and I'll be your teacher." He took a deep breath and gave the class a winning smile. "First things first, how many of you have had a family member that successfully became an animagus?" Harry and 2 other students raised their hands. "Ok, not bad," Sirius said. "I won't lie to you, becoming an animagus is a long, hard process. That's the bad news. The good news," Sirius grinned and scanned the classroom. "Is that it's all worth it. Becoming an animagus is one of the best feelings in the world, because it means you're embracing a part of you that you hardly ever get to see; your animal side." He growled and many of the girls in the class giggled.

As he continued speaking, Harry could see his initial nervousness fade as it was replaced by excitement. It was obvious, to Harry at least, that Sirius meant what he said about the wonderful feeling that came with being an animagus.

“...but above all,” Sirius was saying. “Being an animagus means letting go of all your thoughts, worries, and human constraints. You have to let go, completely, before you can start to embrace the animal inside you. Once you do that, you’ll find that you’re animagus form reflects a part of your personality, one that you may or may not have recognized. Many of you have probably noticed that my animagus form and my human form have a lot in common, some would say too much.” He grinned. “Professor McGonagall is the same way. She’s strict, proper, and it’s almost impossible to put one over on her, which is why she’s a kneazle animagus.”

Hermione raised her hand. “But, Professor,” she said shyly. “How will we know what our form is?”

“Excellent question Miss, Granger, isn’t it?” Sirius said with a wink. Hermione blushed. “Five points to Gryffindor for identifying the first step in becoming an animagus, and bringing us into our first assignment. I want you all to write a paragraph identifying what you consider your most dominant personality traits. In short, what makes you you. Then we’re going to do a little exercise and see what we come up with. I’ll give you until the rest of the period to write your paragraphs because frankly,” Sirius leaned forward and said in a very loud whisper, “I hate homework.”

Harry could only watch in amazement as Sirius became the most popular teacher at Hogwarts, and it hadn’t even taken 10 minutes.

“Now,” he continued, glancing at Harry and Daphne. “A lot of the things we’ll be doing for this class will need more than one person, so, to make it easy, the person you’re sitting with right now will be your partner for the rest of the year.”

Harry looked over at Daphne, who simply nodded back to him politely before the two began their first assignment. When the lesson was over, Sirius motioned for Harry to stay behind.

"I heard about what Snape did," Sirius said angrily when the other students had left. "I wanted to tell you that Dumbledore knows too, and he won't get away with it."

"Sirius, what are you talking about?" Harry asked, perplexed.

Sirius shuffled uncomfortably and looked at his feet. "I know about the Dursleys, Harry," he said quietly. "I know how they treated you. I don't know how Snape found out, but he had no right to tell Malfoy so he could spread it to the rest of the school." He paused before continuing softly, "I'm sorry I couldn't be there."

Harry regarded his godfather intently. It was likely that Sirius knew a little of what life had been like with the Dursleys, but he certainly didn't know the full details.

"Honestly Sirius, it wasn't that bad," Harry lied. "Whatever Snape thinks he found out, Malfoy definitely exaggerated, and I think most of the school knows it."

"You don't have to cover for him, Harry," Sirius said heatedly.

"I'm not," Harry assured him. "Look, this isn't the first time Malfoy has made up some crazy story to make me look bad, so it's possible Snape didn't say anything. In fact, Snape might not know anything about it at all. I definitely wouldn't put it past Malfoy to make the whole thing up on his own. He's done it one too many times now, though, and nobody believes him anymore, so I'd really rather you just left it alone." Harry knew he was walking a fine line with his godfather, but he couldn't allow Sirius to go after Snape for leaking the information because that would make it obvious that the rumors were actually true. The entire situation had been resolved quickly and quietly, and the last thing Harry needed was for someone to bring it up again.

"Are you sure about this?" Sirius asked doubtfully. "I know it might be embarrassing for you, but he shouldn't be able to get away with this."

"I'm sure, Sirius," said Harry. "Besides, if you go after Snape then the whole school will know that there was at least some truth to those rumors, and I'll never hear the end of it. As far as I'm concerned it's over and done with, and I'd just like to move on." He looked at his godfather seriously. "Can you do that for me? Move on and let it go?"

Sirius seemed to think about this for a moment before sighing in frustration. "I guess you're right, but I think you're going too easy on that greasy bastard. He doesn't deserve it, Harry."

"You're right, he doesn't deserve it," Harry answered immediately. "But I do, and going after him will only make things more difficult for me. So forget him," Harry waved a hand dismissively. "Who knows, maybe we'll get lucky and he'll off himself with a botched potion."

Sirius's eyes grew misty at the possibility.

Sirius's popularity continued to grow for the first weeks of term, and before long even Blaise was wondering if it was a mistake not to have taken the class. Of course, the fact that Harry had been paired with Daphne Greengrass made him wish he was in the class for a completely different reason.

Since she and Harry often had work to do together, Daphne now sat with him, Tracey, and Blaise on a semi-frequent basis, much to Blaise's chagrin.

"Here comes your future ex-wife," Blaise muttered to Harry, who was currently explaining the finer points of the summoning charm to a confused Tracey.

"Jealous, Zabini?" Daphne said with a smirk, taking a seat next to Harry.

"I hate to break it to you, Greengrass," said Blaise. "But you're family has nothing to offer me and frankly," he smirked. "You're not that cute."

“What’s the matter, not plain enough for you?” Daphne asked innocently. Her eyes flicked to Tracey, who was too busy to notice.

Blaise eyes flashed, but he remained outwardly calm. “Whatever helps you sleep at night,” he replied. “Just remember, you can transfigure a rat to look like a unicorn, but it’ll always be a rat.”

This time it was Daphne whose eyes flashed, but she, too, kept her composure. Next to her, Harry suddenly jerked up in surprise and began to listen intently. “I guess you would know,” she said dismissively before turning to Harry. “Anyway Harry, I wanted to talk to you about Professor Black. He seems great to us, but I hear that he’s really nasty to Slytherins in his sixth and seventh year classes. Always taking points off, making jokes, that sort of thing.”

Harry frowned. “Sounds like a reverse version of Snape.”

Daphne nodded. “Exactly. Anyway, I thought that since you must have told him about Malfoy, he might think that all of us are like that. Maybe you could talk to him?” She finished uncertainly.

Harry’s frown deepened. “Do either of you know anything about this?” He asked Blaise and Tracey.

Tracey shook her head and Blaise shrugged. “I heard Pucey got thrown out class last week, but not why.”

“He threw Pucey out because he stood up and said his teaching wasn’t fair,” Daphne jumped in. “At least, that’s what I heard.”

“Who told you that?” Blaise asked skeptically.

“Obviously somebody who doesn’t talk to you.”

“Is that right?” Blaise said sarcastically. “You wouldn’t have told this ‘somebody’ that you could get Harry to help him out, would you? As a favor?”

Daphne let out an exaggerated sigh. "You know, Zabini, sometimes it's ok to help somebody just because you can, even if there's nothing in it for you."

"Is that a no?"

"Yes, that's a no," Daphne said snidely before turning to Harry. "I just thought you'd like to know, Harry."

"Well, I'll ask him about it the next time I see him," Harry said, cutting off what was sure to be another insult from Blaise.

Daphne breathed a small sigh of relief and smiled. "Thanks. Anyway, how's your word association coming along?"

"Word association?" Tracey asked, confused.

"Animagus assignment," Harry explained. "I told you we were supposed to list our dominant personality traits?" Tracey nodded. "Well, now we're supposed to have someone read them out loud to us and we write down the first animal that comes to mind without actually thinking about it. We're also supposed to ask our friends how they would describe us, like I did yesterday. Supposedly stuff like this helps us find our forms, though I'm not sure how."

"Well, you're gonna have to find your form later," cut in Blaise. "Because it's time for Defense." Harry glanced at his watch and nodded before packing up his supplies with a quick wave of his wand. Daphne quirked an eyebrow at Harry's casual use of silent casting, but said nothing.

Much to Blaise's chagrin, Daphne walked with them to Moody's classroom, taking a seat at a nearby table when they arrived. When everyone was seated, Moody stood up from his desk and began to pace.

"I've spoken to Dumbledore," he began gruffly. "And we've decided that you've had enough theory on the unforgivables." His magic eye slowly scanned the room. "Theory will never teach you the real power behind dark magic, so today each of you is going to be put under the

Imperious Curse, and you're going to do your best to fight it off. It might seem harsh, since you'll likely all fail, but you've got to know. **CONSTANT VIGILANCE!**" He barked. "On each of your desks is a magically binding waiver. Before we start, I want each of you to read it over and sign at the bottom. If you don't think you can handle this, or don't want to sign the waiver, there's the door." He gestured towards the back of the room. "For the rest of you, read it over and we'll get started."

One by one the students in the class were subjected to the curse, and Harry watched as they performed the ridiculous stunts that Moody told them to. Harry nearly lost it when Blaise performed "I'm called Little Buttercup," from the opera H.M.S Pinafore, which seemed to be one of Moody's favorites.

"Potter, you're next."

Harry stood up anxiously and walked to the front of the room, concentrating on his occlumency and willing himself to emerge the victor. Truth be told, he'd been looking forward to this since Moody had announced it, since it gave him the opportunity to test himself against the most powerful mind control curse in existence. If he could beat this, he could beat anything.

"Imperio," Moody muttered.

Instantly, two things happened in Harry's mind. The first was a feeling of complete euphoria, as if everything in the world was perfect, and there would never be anything to worry about again. However, this feeling was so completely foreign to Harry that his mind seemed to instinctively scream 'ATTACK!' Within a second of Moody casting the curse, Harry's mind was at war with itself.

Jump up on the desk, came Moody's voice in his head. Jump on the desk, now.

NO! Screamed another voice in Harry's head. We will not be controlled!

Jump onto the desk. NOW! Moody's voice said, growing more insistent.

Harry felt his knees bending, preparing to jump...

NEVER!

The second voice shattered the curse's control, and Harry was finally able to occlude his own thoughts from those coming from Moody. With the attack identified, it only took a moment of intense concentration for him to throw off the curse entirely, and he straightened from his half crouched position.

"No." He said firmly.

For a moment, Harry could have sworn that Moody looked furious, but it was quickly replaced with a mangled grin.

"Now that's more like it!" Moody roared. "Did you see that? Potter fought, and he won! We'll try one more time, Potter, to make sure it wasn't a fluke."

Having already experienced the effects of the curse, Harry found it rather easy to throw off the second time, and walked back to his seat with heavy praise and no homework from Moody. The rest of the class was to write an assignment detailing how they could better prepare themselves to fight off the Imperious Curse, to be handed in next class.

As Harry walked out of class, trying his best to answer his friends questions, Moody slipped up to owlery to dispatch a very important letter detailing this latest feat of the Boy-Who-Lived.

The Riddle House

Little Hangleton

“WHAT?!” Wormtail cringed at the ire in his master’s wheezing voice. “What do you mean the plan has failed? How?”

“A letter from Hogwarts, my Lord. Somehow Harry Potter can resist the Imperious Curse completely, so our agent will be unable to bring him to us as planned.”

“Our agent, Wormtail?” The Dark Lord said dangerously. “He is my agent, and mine alone. Don’t make that mistake again.” Wormtail bowed and stuttered an apology. “So, the boy can resist the Imperious,” Voldemort mused. “Does the old fool suspect anything?”

“No, my Lord,” Wormtail replied. “Your servant convinced him it would be educational to subject the students to the curse during class. He used the opportunity to assess its effectiveness on Potter.”

“A good thing, too,” Voldemort rasped. “This changes things. Send word to my loyal servant to increase his contact with the boy, and report anything interesting he learns.” He paused for a moment, deep in thought, when an idea suddenly hit him. “When does my old apprentice Karkaroff arrive at Hogwarts, Wormtail?”

“Uh,” Wormtail began shuffling papers frantically before finally finding the one he was looking for. “The end of October, my Lord.”

Voldemort smiled, causing Wormtail to shudder involuntarily. “You will tell my loyal servant that he is to seek Karkaroff out immediately.”

“The traitor?” Wormtail asked incredulously. Realizing he had interrupted his master, he fell to the floor in apology.

“You are fortunate that I still find you useful, Wormtail,” the Dark Lord said slowly. “Interrupt me again and I may reconsider.” Wormtail flattened himself to the dirty floor in supplication, apologizing profusely. “Now, finish writing down my instructions.” Voldemort continued. “He is to threaten Igor, and tell him to stay away from Harry Potter. He is to specifically mention that the boy will become a beacon for the light, and that any attempts by Igor to seduce him with dark arts will be met with extreme prejudice.”

Wormtail finished copying his master's instructions before looking up quizzically.

"Master, if I may?" He asked hesitantly. Voldemort gestured for him to continue. "If I am mistaken about Karkaroff, why do we not simply contact him directly?"

Voldemort wheezed what might have been a laugh, but it was too weak to tell.

"You should know better than to speak of things you know nothing about," he reprimanded. "But I will answer, for my own amusement if nothing else. Igor respects power, and only power. He was loyal only as long as I was the stronger of us, and I have no doubt that I will have to kill him eventually. However, I have nothing to offer him in my current condition, and he would likely use the knowledge against me to gain favor in high places. He is ruled by his pride, Wormtail, and by his pride can he be manipulated. I want Harry Potter corrupted, and there are few more qualified to do it than Igor." The Dark Lord's mangled face split into what could have been a smile. "Tell me, Wormtail, what do you think his reaction will be when Alastor Moody attempts to force him to stay away from Harry Potter? When he specifically forbids Igor to teach the boy dark arts?" Wormtail stared at his master dumbly and Voldemort sighed. "He will take it as a direct challenge from a hated enemy, and do his best to lull young Potter to his side."

"But master, won't that just make Potter dangerous?"

"Crucio!" Wormtail screamed as the curse hit him, but in his weakened state, Voldemort was only able to hold it for a few short seconds.

"Your tongue is rather loose tonight, Wormtail," Voldemort rasped threateningly. Wormtail cringed. "Remember the price of your answer, and listen well. You tell me the boy was abused as a child and forced to make his own way to survive. He is fiercely independent, and a Slytherin, which means he values ambition and craves power. Even more, he was willing to let Black torture you when it was he who

captured you, which means that he is far from the Golden Boy the old fool wishes him to be. The plan needs to be changed, and I will think on it, but my intentions for Harry Potter have not changed. With the proper motivation, the boy may not prove as dangerous to us as you think. In fact," Voldemort's crimson eyes flashed. "He may yet become our greatest asset."

True to Daphne's prediction, the rumors about Harry being abused had done more harm than good for Draco Malfoy, who was now regarded as a "pathetic, attention seeking prat," in the words of a sixth year Ravenclaw girl. The line had become something of a running joke in the school, since the girl had said it quite loudly in the middle of the Great Hall during dinner. More importantly, none of the teachers had approached Harry about it, and there had been no mention of him in the Daily Prophet; something he was quite thankful for.

In fact, except for the insults flying between Blaise and Daphne, the next few weeks passed entirely without incident for Harry. His classes continued to be boring, with switching spells in Transfiguration and summoning being taught in Charms, both of which he had mastered long ago. Moody had moved beyond the unforgivables and was now teaching the class how to properly cast a few select curses, and Binns was simply Binns.

The only class that remained completely original for Harry was his godfather's Animagus Transfiguration class. After talking with Daphne, Harry had approached Sirius and found that although her account had been exaggerated, it was obvious that the man still held some anti-Slytherin prejudice from before his time in Azkaban. Still, he had promised Harry that he would try to be fair in the future, especially when Harry had compared him to Snape, and that was the last Harry had heard about it.

When the class had finished their word association and research assignments, Sirius moved on to a series of slightly hallucinogenic potions that he claimed would help each student let go of conscious thought, thus making it easier to get in touch with their 'animal' side.

This had presented a significant problem for Harry, to whom letting go of anything was a completely foreign concept.

“Argh! Are you even trying, Potter?” Daphne snapped as Harry threw off the effects of the potion for the third consecutive time.

“I don’t like the feeling I’m getting,” Harry said, frowning. He raised his hand and Sirius came over to their table.

“Is there another way to do this?” Harry asked his Godfather.

“Well, some people can do it without the potion,” Sirius answered. “But it’s a lot easier with it. Trust me, I know.”

“I just can’t stand feeling out of control like that,” Harry admitted slowly. “It feels a little like the Imperious Curse; like I’m submitting to someone else’s control.”

“That’s what it’s supposed to feel like,” Sirius assured him. “Except there’s nobody controlling you except your subconscious. You should start to hear your animal’s voice and feel its desires as you go deeper inside yourself.”

“Well, I think I’ve tried enough for today,” said Harry. “I’ll try again next class.”

Sirius looked slightly disappointed, but nodded before walking off to help the rest of the class.

“Why is this so hard for you?” Daphne asked curiously.

“I just don’t like the feeling,” Harry answered simply.

“Like you’re losing control? You don’t find it liberating?” Daphne pressed, using the same words Sirius had to describe the experience.

“No, I don’t,” Harry admitted. “I don’t find it freeing at all.”

Daphne shrugged. "Maybe you just need to relax a little. It was a little disorienting for me at first, too, but once you get past that it's not that bad."

"Well, maybe I'll try it without the potion," Harry replied.

"Ok, if I could have your attention, please," Sirius said from the front of the room. "By now, most of you have a good idea of what your form feels like. From now until next class, I want you to write down everything you can remember about your experience with the potion and think about it. Ask your friends what they think, and try to think about how you demonstrate these qualities in your daily life. That's it for today, class dismissed." Harry got up and slung his bag over his shoulder, but stopped when he saw Sirius motion for him to remain behind.

"What's up?" He asked when the rest of the class had left.

"You asked if there was another way to do this, and there is, but it isn't exactly pleasant," Sirius began hesitantly. "The potion you took in class is really only half strength, and it can be mixed with a mental suppressant to virtually guarantee that you feel your form, but there are drawbacks."

"Such as?"

"Well, first of all, it will probably knock you out for at least 12 hours. Second, it can sometimes trigger a spontaneous transformation, which is extremely disorienting and confusing. I'm moving the class along slowly so that when they finally find their forms and start to transform, they understand what they're getting into and the feelings associated with it. With a spontaneous transformation, you don't have that. You're suddenly a completely different animal, with all its instincts and desires. Most of the time we have to forcefully reverse the transformation, and that's never pleasant."

Harry frowned. "That doesn't exactly sound promising, but I'll keep it in mind if nothing else works."

Sirius visibly relaxed. "I think that's a good idea. It's still early, and you've got plenty of time to learn."

"Exactly what I was thinking," Harry agreed.

Sirius grinned. "So, anxious for Friday?" He asked with a wink. "You know what they say about French girls..."

Harry looked his godfather thoughtfully. "You know, you seem to be awfully focused on my love life for someone without a girl of his own."

"It's not wrong to look out for my godson first, is it?" Sirius replied. "Besides, I have too many potentials to make a decision just yet."

"I'm sure."

"What about that Greengrass girl? Or maybe Hermione?" Sirius pressed. "It's pretty obvious they both like you."

Harry wondered how Sirius had come to the conclusion that Daphne liked him, but decided to ask about it later.

"Yeah yeah," he said dismissively. "I've gotta go or I'll be late." He turned to leave, but not before calling over his shoulder:

"And I'll believe you've got potentials when I see one."

He expertly sidestepped the hair coloring hex that Sirius sent at him as he slipped out into the hallway, sealing the door with a thought as he left.

By Friday morning the entire school was buzzing with anticipation as the students anxiously awaited the arrival of the Triwizard Tournament candidates from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons. It got so bad that both Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick threatened to throw their entire morning classes into detention just to keep them from speculating about the new arrivals and concentrate

on the lesson. Professor Snape issued the same threat, of course, but unlike the other two it was far from the first time he had done so.

When the time finally came, the entire school emptied out onto the grounds and organized themselves by year with the teachers at the back.

“Aha!” Dumbledore exclaimed suddenly. “Unless I am very much mistaken, the delegation from Beauxbatons approaches!”

The students began to look around frantically, trying to find what the headmaster had spotted, but most continued to look confused.

“Look, there!” Tracey said suddenly, pointing to the sky.

Harry looked to where she was pointing and was just able to make out a very large blob approaching them at high speed.

“Pegasi,” Tracey breathed in awe. “They have a team of Pegasi.”

It took a few moments for Harry to see what Tracey was talking about, but eventually he could make out a large flying carriage drawn by what was unmistakably a team of very large winged horses. The Pegasi began to circle gracefully as they descended toward the ground, oblivious to the awed glances and fierce whispers now running through the assembled students.

When the carriage had finally touched down the door was thrown open and a very large, very feminine foot stepped out, followed by what was unmistakably the largest woman Harry had ever seen.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he heard Malfoy say from behind him. “They have a half-breed as a headmistress? What is the world coming to?” There were several snickers and rude comments from the Slytherins surrounding him, drawing a harsh look from Professor McGonagall.

“What’s he talking about?” Harry whispered to Blaise as Dumbledore stepped forward to meet the Beauxbatons delegation.

"Isn't it obvious?" Blaise whispered back. "She has to have giant blood in her somewhere, it's the only explanation." He snorted. "Maybe she's related to Hagrid."

"Really?" Harry asked. Dumbledore had just introduced the huge woman as Madame Maxime and was leading her and the Beauxbatons students into the castle. There appeared to be about a dozen of them, a mixed group of boys and girls, all shivering and looking around apprehensively. "I guess I'd never really thought about it."

"Even some strange spell damage wouldn't have that affect permanently," Blaise answered. "I'd bet a thousand galleons they both have giant blood in them somewhere, and probably not a small amount."

Harry was about to reply when he was interrupted by a loud shout from Lee Jordan.

"The lake! Look at the lake!"

Harry turned toward the lake with the rest of the students just in time to see a ship's mast begin to rise out of a fierce whirlpool. A large, ghostly looking ship slowly emerged flying a flag that Harry assumed belonged to the Durmstrang School. When it had surfaced completely, the whirlpool vanished and people began to disembark. Harry turned when he heard Dumbledore emerge from the castle and was surprised to see a wary, almost menacing look on the headmaster's face as he approached the delegation from Durmstrang.

"I can't believe Dumbledore let him come here," Blaise said, shaking his head in what appeared to be amusement.

"Let who come?" Questioned Harry.

"Karkaroff," Blaise answered, pointing to the man currently leading the Durmstrang students towards the school. He was tall and slender, with long, black hair and blue eyes that seemed to take in everything at once. He was dressed in regal looking robes made of sleek, silver

fur and walked with such confidence and casual grace that he drew more than one impressed glance from the students.

“He’s the headmaster of Durmstrang,” Blaise continued. “But he used to be a Death Eater, and an important one too. It was rumored that he was the Dark Lord’s apprentice at one point, but that was really just a rumor.”

“He’s a Death Eater?” Harry asked incredulously. “What the hell is he doing here, then?”

“When the Dark Lord fell, Karkaroff gave up a good number of other Death Eaters, and claimed that although he had associated with the Dark Lord in the past, he’d never actually attacked anyone.” Blaise snorted. “Total bollocks, of course. Karkaroff was something of a lieutenant for the Dark Lord, supposedly one of his most powerful followers, so it’s pretty much a guarantee that he led some of the attacks, but they could never prove it. He was even questioned under veritaserum, but always gave the same answers.”

“Veritaserum isn’t a hundred percent reliable, though,” said Harry.

“Exactly,” Blaise nodded. “But without any other evidence, they couldn’t send him to Azkaban, and since he named so many other prominent Death Eaters, he got off with a slap on the wrist.”

“But even though they couldn’t prove it, people like Dumbledore know the truth,” Harry said, catching on. “That explains why Dumbledore wasn’t happy to see him.” He watched as Dumbledore led Karkaroff and the rest of the Durmstrang students towards the castle. As they passed, Harry caught the profile of the student walking at the head of the column with Karkaroff and realized that he recognized him.

“Hey, isn’t that Viktor Krum?”

Blaise looked at where Harry was pointing and his eyes widened. “It sure is. Wow, I didn’t know he was still in school.” He chuckled. “I guess we know who the Durmstrang champion is going to be.”

The Hogwarts students followed the Durmstrang delegation back into the school and made their way into the Great Hall. Harry noticed that the foreign students seemed to be confused for a moment as they watched the rest of the students make their way to their house tables. Finally, the Beauxbatons students took seats at the Ravenclaw table while the Durmstrang students sat with Harry and his housemates. Dumbledore made a brief announcement welcoming the other schools before the tables were filled with food and the feast began.

“What’s with all the new food?” Tracey asked, eyeing several dishes hesitantly.

“Probably for the foreigners,” Blaise answered shortly. He looked up the table to where Malfoy was currently fawning over Victor Krum and snorted.

Harry, meanwhile, was watching the head table, where Moody and Karkaroff were apparently having a very emotional discussion. Dumbledore quickly got up and separated them, and Harry was surprised to see Karkaroff eyes immediately flash towards him. The Durmstrang headmaster looked back at Moody and smirked, tapping his right shoulder mockingly.

“What do suppose that’s about?” Harry asked Blaise, motioning to the head table.

“Given each of their histories, they’ve probably fought each other before,” said Blaise. “Looks like one of them took a wound to the shoulder.”

“Who are those two?” Tracey asked, pointing to two other adults at the head table.

“That’s Ludo Bagman, the old Quidditch player,” Blaise said, indicating the larger of the two men. He had a round, boyish face and seemed to be easily amused, if his constant laughter throughout the meal was any indication. “I recognize the other one, but I can’t remember his name.”

For a moment it looked like Moody and Karkaroff were going to duel right there in the Great Hall, but eventually cooler heads prevailed and they both took their seats. Harry continued to watch the interaction between the teachers for the rest of the meal, but although the situation seemed tense, there were no more outbursts on either side. When the feast was over, Dumbledore stood once more to announce the start of the tournament.

“Before we announce the selection process, I’d like to introduce two representatives from the Ministry of Magic who were integral in bringing the tournament to Hogwarts this year: Mr. Bartemius Crouch, Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation, and Mr. Ludo Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports.” There was a round of applause for the two men before Dumbledore motioned for silence.

“Mr. Bagman and Mr. Crouch have worked tirelessly over the last few months on the arrangement for the Triwizard Tournament,” Dumbledore continued, “and they will be joining myself, Professor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime on the panel that will judge the champions’ efforts. The instructions for the tasks have already been examined and approved by Mr. Crouch and Mr. Bagman. There will be three tasks, spaced throughout the year, designed to test all aspects of the champions’ skill and character. Each champion will be given a score after each task, and the one with the highest overall score will be named this year’s Triwizard Champion. Now, for the announcement you’ve been waiting for,” Dumbledore smiled at the hall and walked out from behind his podium towards a large box that had been placed on a pedestal in front of him. “The school champions will be chosen by an impartial selector: the Goblet of Fire.” Dumbledore tapped the box with his wand and it fell away to reveal a large, wooden cup wreathed in blue flames. The students all gazed at the goblet in awe as the headmaster continued.

“Anyone wishing to enter the tournament must write their name and school upon a piece of parchment and drop it into the Goblet. You will have twenty four hours to do so, and the champion will be selected following dinner tomorrow night. To ensure that no student under the age of 17 is able to enter, I will be drawing an age line around the Goblet of Fire once it has been placed in the entrance hall.”

Dumbledore smiled sympathetically as loud groans were heard throughout the hall. "Finally, I feel the need to impress upon all of you the seriousness of entering yourself into the tournament, for it is not a commitment to be made lightly. The tasks are designed to test not only your magical skill, but also your ingenuity, intelligence, and ability to face danger. What's more, placing your name in the goblet represents a binding magical contract. If chosen, you are therefore obligated to continue until the end. Now, I believe it is time for bed, and wish you all a good night."

The hall was immediately overcome with chatter once again as students made their way back to their respective common rooms.

"So, who's it gonna be?" Blaise asked the question that was on every student's mind.

"I don't know anyone from Hogwarts that's planning to enter other than Cedric," Harry answered.

"He wouldn't be too bad," said Tracey. "But don't tell anyone else I said that."

"They wouldn't believe me anyway," Blaise said, laughing. "Besides, as long as it isn't a Gryff, I'll be happy."

"Well, whoever it is, they better be prepared if they're going to take on Krum," Harry said absently. "Why can't we get out, anyway? Is somebody blocking the exit?"

"I can't tell," Blaise said, frowning. "It looks like somebody is blocking the way, and I don't like waiting." Suddenly he turned to Harry and smirked mischievously. "Whoa Potter!" He said loudly, holding his hands up in mock surrender. "I'll tell them to start moving, just don't get violent."

Harry leveled a vicious glare at his friend just as the group of students in front of them turned around. The group took one look at the expression on Harry's face before they scrambled to the sides to make room. Blaise smirked victoriously as the opening widened giving Harry a clear view of what was causing the traffic jam.

Standing on the middle of the entryway was a large group of boys surrounding a tall, blonde girl dressed in what Harry recognized as a Beauxbatons uniform. The girl was strikingly beautiful, although to Harry it seemed like her movements were almost too graceful, as if she he were seeing her in a movie instead of in person. The group of boys surrounding her seemed to be deliberately dragging their feet, each hoping to get a chance to say something to grab her attention, and clogging the exit in the process. As he approached Harry saw that several girls were trying to get the boys attention, but were either shaken off or ignored.

“Will you move!?” Screeched a sixth year Ravenclaw. “You’re holding everyone up!”

“Yeah, ok,” mumbled one of the boys, not turning around. “Whate-.”

BOOM!

Harry’s canon blast charm startled the group of assembled students and broke the boys out of their trance.

“You’re blocking the exit,” Harry said succinctly. “If you want to talk, move over there.” A few of the boys moved immediately, while some of the older ones muttered to themselves and shot questioning looks at the girl from Beauxbatons.

“Who is zis boy?” She asked in a snooty French accent, turning up her nose. “I will not be ordered around by a child.”

“Yeah Potter,” broke in another boy. “You can’t tell her-”

BOOM!

This time Harry sent a weak concussion hex as well as the canon blast charm, forcing the girl and the rest of the group to take a step backwards.

“That’ll do.” He said as he started to walk past them. He had only taken two steps before the girl seemed to materialize in front of him.

"You are Arry Potter?" She asked, her eyes focused on his forehead. Suddenly she smiled, and Harry felt strangely drawn to her. Up close, she was even more beautiful than he'd imagined, and he found himself wishing for nothing more than to be near her. The rational part of his mind noted that it was a strange feeling, almost like....

ATTACK!

With a start, he realized exactly what it felt like; the veela at the world cup. It was definitely stronger, probably because she was so close, but it was the same feeling.

"My name is Fleur, Fleur Delacour," she said, holding out her hand daintily.

Angrily, Harry shifted his occlumency shields and banished the foreign presence from his mind before scowling at the girl in front of him.

"I don't care who you are," he growled. "Don't try that trick on me again." With that he strode past the astonished girl and walked off without a backwards glance. Blaise tried to follow but found himself enthralled as he tried to pass Fleur.

"That wasn't really fair, Potter," Blaise muttered, staring wide-eyed at the blonde beauty.

"Oh for god's sake," Tracey huffed, smacking him on the arm before dragging him off. "Just because she's French..." She muttered angrily.

"Actually, it's more because she's part veela," said Harry as they approached. "It's more powerful than what I felt at the World Cup, but it's definitely the same thing."

By now Blaise had shaken himself out of his stupor and had the grace to look embarrassed.

"Not exactly fair," he muttered to himself before looking at Harry. "You could have said something, you know."

"Would you have believed me?"

Blaise thought about that before shaking his head. "Probably not."

"Veela," Tracey spat, shaking her head. "I can't believe they let her come."

"Why not?" Asked Harry, confused.

"Why do you mean, why not?" Tracey asked incredulously.

"Women hate veela because they steal their men," Blaise interrupted, smirking. "There's been more than one family broken up because the husband was ensnared by a veela, only to be left heartbroken later."

"That's all they do," Tracey nearly shrieked. "They use their charm to take any man they want and parade him around like a pet, even if he's already in love or married. They're all sluts, too." She added nastily. "I'll bet she's already thinking about which boys at Hogwarts she'll have this year."

"Tracey is exaggerating, as usual," Blaise broke in smoothly. "Not all veela are like that, although they certainly carry the stigma."

"Typical man," Tracey huffed. "Anything for a pretty face."

"Typical woman," Blaise quipped back. "Every girl prettier than you is evil."

As soon as the words left his mouth, Blaise knew he'd gone too far. Tracey's mouth opened and closed soundlessly for a moment before her eyes started to fill with tears.

"I didn't mean that," Blaise began apologetically, but Tracey turned and fled down the stairs. Blaise sighed. "I'm going to be paying for that one tomorrow."

Harry only nodded as they continued down to the Slytherin common room.

As expected, Tracey refused to listen to Blaise's apology the next morning, leaving Harry with the unenviable task of being the mediator between the two long-time friends. This continued until evening and into dinner.

"Harry, would you ask him," Tracey said, jerking her finger in Blaise's direction, "to pass the pumpkin juice."

Blaise exhaled heavily. "Look, I said I was sorry, and I'm not sure what else you want. You know how I get sometimes, I say things I don't mean. Plus I was still feeling some effects from the Veela charm."

Tracey snorted at his excuse when she suddenly saw her opportunity for payback, and waved her hand in the air.

"Hey Daphne," she called as Daphne Greengrass walked in to the Great Hall. "Sit with us."

For a moment Daphne was confused, but it only took a moment of careful study to see that Davis was upset with Zabini over something and wanted to get under his skin. Daphne, of course, was only too happy to oblige.

"Hi Tracey, Harry" she said politely before smirking at Blaise. "Zabini."

"Blaise was just telling us how weak he is against Delacour's veela charm," said Tracey. "Go on, Blaise."

"Oh very nice," Blaise said sarcastically, glaring at her.

"Oh not you too!" Daphne exclaimed before turning to Tracey. "Don't you just hate that? Blonde hair and a pretty face and all of a sudden it's 'veela charm this' and 'veela charm that.'" She shook her head. "Pretty pathetic excuse if you ask me."

"She's part veela," said Blaise through gritted teeth. "Even Potter said so." Harry nodded.

“Really?” Daphne asked skeptically. “Curious, then, that Harry was able to ignore her and you couldn’t even walk past her. And she was actually trying to stop him.”

Blaise took one look at the two girls and decided to cut his losses and remain silent.

It appeared that Daphne was going to press her advantage, but Dumbledore suddenly stood up and began to walk toward the podium, effectively silencing the hall.

“Well,” the headmaster began. “Now that our appetites have been satisfied, I believe it is almost time for the goblet to make its decision. I would ask that each of our champions stand up when their name is called and make their way to the antechamber behind me, where they will receive their first instructions.” The headmaster paused for a moment to let his instruction to sink in. “Now then, without further ado,” he turned and looked at the goblet expectantly. Almost on queue, the blue flames in the Goblet of Fire turned red and began to spark. Dumbledore stepped over to it just as a large flame shot out of the top accompanied by a singed piece of singed parchment. The headmaster caught it deftly and read it before calling out:

“The champion for Durmstrang will be Viktor Krum!”

There was a loud burst of applause as Krum stood up and walked swiftly to the front of the hall and into the antechamber. The hall continued to chatter after he’d gone until the flames in the goblet turned red again and shot out another piece of parchment.

“The champion for Beauxbatons will be Fleur Delacour!”

Again there was a burst of applause, this time accompanied by more than one wail of disappointment from the remaining Beauxbatons students. Fleur stood up gracefully and made a slight bow before proceeding to join Krum.

“Here we go,” Tracey muttered as the silence in the hall became deafening. With another burst of flame the third piece of parchment shot out of the goblet and into the headmaster’s waiting hand.

“The champion for Hogwarts will be Cedric Diggory!”

At that announcement, every student at the Hufflepuff table jumped to their feet and began to cheer wildly. Next to Harry, Blaise groaned.

“I should’ve guessed,” he said, shaking his head. “Well, it could definitely be worse. Just think if-”

He stopped abruptly, and Harry looked up to see that Dumbledore had also paused and was looking at the red flames in the goblet questioningly. A moment later another large flame shot up, accompanied by a fourth piece of parchment. Once again, the headmaster plucked it out of the air and brought it before his eyes, but this time he paused before making the announcement. Finally he cleared his throat and called:

“Harry Potter.”

For a moment, Harry was confused. Even as every head in the Great Hall turned in his direction, he was thinking that this was some type of joke. His eyes flashed to Sirius, thinking it was just his style, but his godfather looked just as confused as everyone else.

The entire hall was deathly silent as Harry looked around him with a frown on his face.

“This is a joke, right?” He said to no one in particular.

Dumbledore, who had been whispering with the other professors at the head table, abruptly returned to the podium and cleared his throat.

“Harry Potter, please proceed to the antechamber with the other champions.” He said firmly.

Harry looked at him incredulously. “You can’t be serious,” he said, standing from his seat. Rather than turn towards the antechamber with the other champions, Harry walked straight up to Dumbledore.

"I don't know what's going on here," he said quietly. "But I didn't put my name in that thing."

"This is not the right place to discuss it," said Dumbledore. "If you will follow the other champions, we will join you shortly and we can resolve this matter."

Harry thought about it for a second, but finally nodded and walked toward the antechamber. As he entered, he noticed the other three champions situated around the fireplace at the far end of the room. He continued towards them and was about halfway there when Fleur Delacour looked up and noticed him.

"Potter?" She asked, surprised. "What is it? Did zey send you with a message?"

Harry shook his head and was about to reply when the door burst open and Dumbledore entered, followed by a host of others including Moody, Bagman, Crouch, Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime. Sirius was also there, and it looked like he wasn't sure whether he should be proud or angry. Harry again opened his mouth to say something, but was interrupted by Ludo Bagman.

"Well, well, well," the large man said brightly. "As unlikely as it seems, may I be the first to present the fourth Triwizard champion!" He gestured grandly at Harry.

The room was immediately overcome with several shouted objections, one of which came from Harry himself, before Dumbledore regained control of the room.

"I understand your objections," he said calmly, looking at Madame Maxime and Karkaroff in turn. "And if you have an alternative solution, I would be delighted to hear it." He looked at them questioningly, but both remained silent. "I have spoken with Mr. Crouch, and I'm afraid the rules are clear: Harry's name came out of the goblet, and thus he is magically bound to compete in the tournament. There can be no other way."

“WHAT?” Harry blurted. The rest of the room turned to him in astonishment. “That’s ridiculous. I didn’t put my name in the damn goblet-” Fleur snorted but Harry ignored her. “And I don’t want any part of the tournament, so,” he shrugged, “problem solved.”

“But of course he is lying!” Said Madame Maxime.

“I’m afraid it’s irrelevant,” Bagman broke in loudly. “No one knows the rulebook better than Barty, so if he says Harry has to compete, there’s no way around it. The boy will just have to do the best he can.”

“Wait, even if he didn’t put his own name in?” Asked Sirius.

Crouch seemed to stutter for a moment before adopting a sheepish expression.

“I’m sorry to say that has never been an issue before. The age limit was only imposed this year, as you know, and to be chosen as a champion is such an honor that, well,” he trailed apologetically. “It’s never come up before.”

“So what you’re saying is that the goblet can force anybody, anywhere into a magically binding contract to compete in the Triwizard tournament, no matter what?” Harry asked incredulously. “I could have put Dumbledore’s name in and he’d have to compete if it came out?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Crouch snapped. “You entered into the contract when you signed your name on that parchment.”

“Let me see that,” Harry said, holding his hand out to Dumbledore. The headmaster handed him the parchment and he examined it incredulously. It was definitely his signature written there, which just made him more confused.

“This is my writing,” he muttered. “My full signature, even.”

"Let me see that," Moody said suddenly, grabbing the parchment from Harry.

"You admit it is your writing, then?" Crouch asked.

"It's my writing, but I didn't put it in the goblet." Harry answered.

"Whether that is true or not," said Crouch. "The contract is already in effect. Mr. Potter will have to compete."

The room was once again overcome with protests and objections before Dumbledore was able to restore order.

"As I said before," he said calmly. "If anyone has an alternative, I'd be delighted to hear it. If not, I'm afraid we have little choice but to let Harry compete, even if he himself would rather not." He look at Harry apologetically.

Harry, however, had had enough.

"I've already said I didn't want to compete in the tournament," he began, holding up a hand to forestall any objections. "But you say that doesn't matter, so let me rephrase: I will not be competing in the Triwizard tournament, contract or no contract. There are three champions," he motion to the other three students in the room. "Not four. Call it an freak accident, a magical anomaly, or anything else you can think of. Say you have absolutely no idea why the goblet spit out four names instead of three, but that it won't affect the integrity of the tournament." Harry paused for a moment to let his words sink in. "Just so we're clear, I am not competing in the Triwizard tournament. Cedric Diggory is the only Hogwarts champion, does everyone understand?"

"Dumbly-dorr, how can you allow a student to speak to us so?" Madame Maxime asked incredulously. "He breaks the rules and blames us?"

"The boy might be on to something," said Moody thoughtfully. "It would take a powerful confundus charm to make the goblet forget that only three schools compete in the tournament, and I'm guessing

whoever it was wasn't doing Potter any favors. I'll run some tests on this parchment if that's ok with you, Albus." Dumbledore nodded.

"As refreshing as your paranoia is, auror," Karkaroff spat the last word mockingly. "It does absolutely nothing to help us solve this problem."

"The problem is solved," Harry cut in. "I'm not competing."

"I'm afraid that simply isn't possible, Mr. Potter," Crouch began firmly.

"Well, it's going to have to be possible," Harry interrupted. "And I want to see a copy of these rules as soon as possible."

Crouch scowled at being interrupted. "That I can arrange, but-

"I have nothing else to say to you," Harry interrupted again before turning and walking towards his godfather.

"You really didn't enter yourself, did you?" Sirius asked him quietly.

"No, I didn't. I'd like to know who did though, and how."

The two stood in silence for a moment and watched Dumbledore and Crouch attempt to placate Madame Maxime. Whatever they said apparently worked, as the large woman nodded grudgingly before leading Fleur out of the room. Crouch looked disapprovingly at Harry before he walked out as well, followed by Karkaroff and Viktor Krum.

"Was that really necessary, Harry?" Dumbledore asked tiredly once they were gone. "Mr. Crouch is only trying to enforce rules that have been in place for a very long time."

"That's not my problem," Harry answered. "This entire system is ridiculous, and you know it."

"He really does have a point, headmaster," Sirius said hesitantly. "How can there be a magical contract if he didn't initiate it?"

Dumbledore sighed and removed his glasses, rubbing the bridge of his nose tiredly. "I'm afraid I am at a loss to explain that myself. There

is, however, no one more knowledgeable about the Goblet of Fire and the Triwizard Tournament than Mr. Crouch, and it is safe to assume that he is not simply lying.”

“What’s this magical contract do, anyway?” Asked Harry.

Dumbledore smiled sadly. “The consequences for breaking a magical contract vary depending on what the contract is for. In this instance, because the contract was made to apply strictly to students, to break it would mean being expelled from Hogwarts and banned from attending any other magical institution or participating in a licensed apprenticeship.”

“What?!” Exclaimed Sirius, aghast.

“You must remember, Sirius, that the rules for the Triwizard Tournament have not been changed for over 500 years,” said Dumbledore. “At that time, for a student to back out of his commitment would have been a mark of dishonor, rendering him unworthy to study magic in the eyes of the community. Unfortunately, though we did take precautions to ensure the safety of the champions this time around, we did not think to examine the rules in their entirety. For that I apologize, since it has led to our current dilemma.”

“There has to be a way around this,” Harry said stubbornly. “What if I get disqualified for cheating or something like that?”

“The result would be the same, I’m afraid.”

Harry was silent for a moment before he shook his head angrily. “I’ll find a way out, just make sure Crouch gives me the rules tomorrow. Until then, I’d appreciate it if you would do as I asked and not announce me as a fourth champion.”

Beside him, Sirius chuckled nervously. “It’s, uh, already a little late for that,” he said hesitantly. “Bagman sort of announced you as the fourth champion before we came in here.”

“I should have known that,” said Harry with a mirthless chuckle. “Why wouldn’t he have?”

"I know you're upset Harry-" Dumbledore began.

"Whatever," Harry interrupted angrily, turning his back on the headmaster. "I'm going to bed. Make sure Crouch has me those rules by tomorrow, or I'll get them myself."

With that, he walked out of the room and back towards the dungeons. He ignored everyone trying to get his attention as he walked through the Slytherin common room and went straight to bed, trying in vain to find some way to fix the debacle he suddenly found himself in.

As expected, the next morning Harry was greeted with a great many whispers and even more cold shoulders from the other students, most of whom obviously believed that he had entered himself in the tournament. Tracey and Blaise believed him, of course, and the rest of Slytherin house seemed more upset that he wouldn't tell them how he beat the age line than the fact that he'd actually entered, but the rest of the students weren't so understanding, especially the Hufflepuffs.

When Harry saw Cedric walk into the Great Hall for breakfast, he immediately got up and made his way over to him. Cedric saw him approach and waited for him in front of the Hufflepuff table.

"Here to tell me you didn't enter yourself?" The older boy asked wryly.

"I didn't put my name in that fucking cup," said Harry.

Cedric chuckled. "I know you didn't, don't even worry about it." Behind him, several of the people at the table gasped. "You know, one of the first things Jack said about you was that it seemed like crazy stuff just seemed to seek you out. I guess he was right." He lost his grin and turned serious. "Do you know what you're going to do?"

"I'm going to get these ridiculous rules from Crouch and find a way out," Harry answered firmly. "I refuse to believe that an old cup can force me to do something against my will, magic or no magic."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that, actually," said Cedric. "From what I hear, the Goblet of Fire is a pretty powerful artifact, and the rules it uses are nothing short of ancient. I wouldn't be surprised if you really did have to compete."

"Well, if comes to that I'll just slack off and lose," Harry snorted. "Badly. Either that or I'll deliberately screw up every task so nobody knows what's going on. At least that might be fun."

Cedric laughed. "Just make sure you go after me, then." He started to turn towards his house table but stopped and turned back to Harry. "Oh, and don't worry about these sods," he said jokingly, waving a hand at his housemates. "They're just mad because they think you're stealing my thunder, but they'll get over it. Especially once they realize that you're the one that got the short end of this whole deal."

"I appreciate that," Harry said honestly.

Cedric shrugged. "What are friends for?" He smiled and took a seat while Harry walked out of the Great Hall and back to his common room. He would give Crouch until lunchtime to get him those rules, otherwise he would start looking on his own. He was also planning to ask Blaise what he knew about magical contracts, and see if his Slytherin friend had any idea who would go through the effort to enter Harry in the tournament, or why.

Thinking of all this, Harry sighed. So much for a relaxing year.

A/N You'll notice that the details of the unforgivables are very different in my story than they are in canon. I did this on purpose because they are supposed to be the darkest of all curses, and to me that means that they shouldn't be easy to cast. This is especially true of the killing curse, since it's unblockable. In this story, the unforgivables will not be the most effective battle spells, and many wizards, even Death Eaters, will not be able to cast them at will.

Next chapter Harry's going to do some digging into the history of the Triwizard tournament and uncover some potentially useful information.

Daphne continues her games, and Karkaroff asks Harry some “innocent” questions.

As always, thanks for reading.

True to his word, Crouch found Harry at lunchtime to deliver a copy of the tournament rules, and Harry spent the rest of the day reading through them, although he was quite surprised at how short they seemed to be.

The next morning at breakfast Harry was sitting at the Slytherin table with a scowl on his face when Blaise came in and sat across from him.

"Hey Blaise," he asked his friend across the table. "When was the last time there was a Triwizard Tournament?"

Blaise looked thoughtful for a moment. "About 120 years ago, I think," he answered.

Harry exhaled heavily. "That's what I thought." He got up and approached the head table.

"I know I'm not going to like the answer to this question," Harry said as he approached. "But are these the rules for the Triwizard Tournament? All the rules?"

"Of course," snapped Crouch, offended.

"This is the original set of rules?" Harry asked skeptically. "Then why are they all dated 1871?"

"That was when the last tournament was held, of course," said Crouch.

"So you just looked at the last tournament they tried and changed it around a little? You never bothered to take a look at the original rules?"

"The first Triwizard tournament was almost 900 years ago!" Crouch said incredulously. "We decided on a more modern approach."

"Of course you did," said Harry. "Unfortunately, nobody bothered to tell the Goblet of Fire, so the rules I'm stuck in are the 900 year old kind."

Crouch's mouth opened and closed for a moment, but no sound came out. Next to him, Dumbledore was frowning.

"I believe Mr. Potter is correct," the headmaster said quietly. "I'm afraid our primary concern for the tournament was the safety of the champions during the three tasks, and it is quite likely that the enchantments surrounding the Goblet of Fire have not been changed since the very first Triwizard Tournament." Crouch began to look flustered as Harry continued to glare at him.

"Where can I find out what I want to know?" Harry finally asked, turning to Dumbledore.

"I'm afraid I do not know the answer to that, Harry," Dumbledore admitted. "However, there are several historians I can contact, if you wish."

"Just give me their names," Harry said tiredly. "I'll contact them myself."

"Very well." Dumbledore conjured a quill and began to write on a piece of parchment.

"Bang up job you did here, Crouch," Sirius said sarcastically. He threw a worried look at Harry, who ignored it.

"By the way," Dumbledore said as he handed the parchment to Harry. "Should you fail to find an alternative, the first task is scheduled for November the twenty-fourth. It will take place in front of the judges and the other students."

"So I've got three weeks then," Harry said, turning away. He could only hope it would be enough time.

It took a day and a half for Harry to hear back from one of the wizarding historians suggested by Professor Dumbledore, and another two days before the wizard agreed to research the subject for him. Harry was hopeful that the man would find something before the first task, but not optimistic.

"You know, it's not that bad," Row said tentatively they sat in the library later that week. "It's just a silly tournament, after all."

"A silly tournament?" Said Padma, aghast. "It's a lot more than that, Row. The winner of the tournament will be famous, historic even. I'd say it's a very big deal."

"Thanks Padma," Row said sarcastically. "It's not like I was trying to cheer him up or anything."

Padma had the grace to look embarrassed. "Sorry?"

Row shook her head in exasperation. "Look, all I'm saying is that it's not the end of the world," she continued. "You can do anything Cedric can do, so what's the worst that can happen?"

"I guess that's true," Harry admitted. "But it's not the tournament itself I'm worried about. Somebody put me in the tournament, and I want to know why."

"Well, I think it's barbaric that they can make you compete against your will," said Hermione. She looked at Harry. "Have you heard anything about that, by the way?"

"The historian I talked to said it might take some time," Harry replied. "It turns out that one of the main reasons Crouch looked at the last tournament for guidelines is that nobody knows for sure what the original rules were." He snorted. "Even the historians don't know. I just hope this guy knows where he can find out."

"You should sue," said Hermione.

Row looked at her questioningly. "Can you do that in the wizarding world? Sue somebody?"

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know, but if you can, you should, Harry. This is basically the definition of negligence."

"Our courts don't really work that way," Padma said hesitantly. "The system is a lot older-"

"Archaic, you mean," Row muttered.

Padma glared. "I was going to say traditional."

"Both essentially the same thing, right?" Hermione broke in diplomatically. "The wizarding world prides itself on its old customs and traditions, which means that we can go to school at a place like Hogwarts that has been around for a thousand years, but it also means that most of the governing bodies are very outdated."

"The tournament rules are more than just outdated, I think," Harry said wryly.

Hermione shrugged. "Like I said, 900 years of negligence."

"And of course Harry has to find out the hard way," said Row.

"You know, at first I didn't believe it when Row said you didn't want to compete," Padma said slowly. "I mean, why not? Half the school would kill to be in your position."

"It's more likely somebody is hoping I'll get killed by being in this position," Harry corrected her. "Like I said before, someone put a lot of effort into entering me in the tournament. Do you really think they did it so that I would enjoy myself, or for any other good reason?"

Padma thought about that for a moment. "I see your point."

"I think eet is cowardice," said a Beauxbatons girl who had been eavesdropping. "Of course, I can see why. You 'ave no chance against ze likes of Krum and Delacour."

Padma and Hermione glared, but Row laughed. "He's got a better chance than you. At least he's in the tournament."

The French girl flushed and opened her mouth to say something before stomping away angrily.

"Jealous bint," Row muttered. "You know, I haven't met a single Beauxbatons girl who wasn't completely stuck up. Why is that?"

"At least she's not a veela like the other one," said Padma.

"I can't believe you'd say something so blatantly prejudicial!" Hermione exclaimed. "Just because she's part veela doesn't mean she's evil."

Padma shook her head. "You don't understand, Hermione. A veela's only purpose is to seduce and destroy men, they don't know how to do anything else."

"How do you know that?" Row asked skeptically.

"Everybody knows that," Padma answered confidently. "It's common knowledge."

"Sounds more like unfounded prejudice to me," said Hermione. "The same kind of thing most muggleborns face." Padma looked slightly abashed at that, but refused to back down. "Well, in any case—"

"Excuse me, Mr. Potter?"

Harry turned to find boy in a Durmstrang uniform holding an envelope. "Yes?"

"I was instructed to give this to you." He held out the envelope to Harry, who took. With a bow, the boy turned and left.

"That was strange," Harry mused, turning the letter over in his hand. "It feels like it's enchanted."

"Enchanted how?" Padma asked. "Like a portkey?"

"Only the headmaster can make portkeys in and out of Hogwarts," Row and Hermione said together. They looked at each in surprise before they both started laughing.

“That was just weird,” said Padma.

“I keep telling you to read *Hogwarts: A History*,” Row teased gently. “Then maybe you wouldn’t feel left out.”

Meanwhile, Harry had opened the letter and was reading it thoughtfully.

“Well,” Row said impatiently. “What does it say?”

“It’s a dinner invitation,” Harry answered, clearly puzzled. “It says that I’m invited to a dinner with the other champions that will be hosted on the *Durmstrang* ship tomorrow night.”

“I hope you vill attend,” came the voice of Viktor Krum as he emerged from behind the nearest bookshelf. “It vould be nice to know each other better before ve face one another in de tournament, yes?”

“I’m actually trying to find a way for me to not compete in the tournament,” Harry answered honestly. “Someone else put my name in the goblet and I’d rather not find out why.”

Krum shrugged. “Still, you may end up competing, no?” Harry nodded grudgingly. “Den vat harm vill it be?”

Harry’s brow furrowed. “I’ll think about it.”

“Of course,” said Krum, bowing. He turned to leave and Harry could have sworn that his eyes flashed towards Hermione for a moment, but he couldn’t be sure.

“That was a little strange,” Row said when he had gone. “Did anybody else notice how he seemed to materialize right behind us?”

“He does that all the time,” Hermione said matter-of-factly. At her friends astonished looks, she flushed slightly. “He’s in the library a lot and I never see him come in, that’s all I meant.”

“Sure it is,” Row said knowingly. “Looks like Hermione has a bit of a celebrity crush.”

Hermione blushed bright red. "I-I most certainly do not!"

Row laughed. "Oh, calm down, I was only kidding." She smirked. "Maybe."

"So are you going to go to the dinner, Harry?" Hermione asked, trying to change the subject.

Row shot her a speculative look, but let it go. "Well, I think it sounds cool," she said. "Even if you quit the tournament, you might as well get some perks while you can, right?"

Hermione looked at Row disapprovingly, but Harry just shrugged. "We'll see." The conversation lapsed after that and the group went back to studying. A short time later, Cedric Diggory entered the library and made his way over to their table.

"Hey Harry, hey girls," he said, flashing a smile at the group before looking at Harry. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure," Harry answered as he got up and followed Cedric out into the hallway. "What's up?"

"Did you get an invitation from Karkaroff about a dinner tomorrow night?"

Harry nodded. "Just got it, actually. You too?"

"Yeah, I'm not sure I want to go though," said Cedric. "I don't know how much you know about Karkaroff, but he's not exactly one of the good guys."

"Yeah, I heard he was a big time Death Eater but got off because they couldn't prove anything," said Harry.

"My dad said the same thing," Cedric replied. "But I don't want it to look like I'm scared by not going, we are representing the whole school, after all."

"No, you're representing the whole school," Harry corrected. "I'm still hoping to get out of this thing."

"Well, you're not going to be out of it by tomorrow, so we're in the same boat," Cedric said reasonably. "What do you think?"

"I'm going to ask Sirius what he knows about it. If the invitation is legitimate and it's an official event, I'm sure some of the teachers will be there."

"You're probably right, I'll ask Sprout," said Cedric. Suddenly he smirked. "I'd tell you to ask your head of house, but..." He trailed off.

Harry snorted. "Maybe that's not a bad idea. I'll ask Snape and just do the opposite of whatever he suggests." He looked back into the library and saw that Ginny Weasley had joined Row, Padma, and Hermione, who were now all giggling to each other. He sighed. Cedric saw this and chuckled.

"Honestly, I don't know how you do it, Harry. Studying with all girls?" He shook his head. "Bad enough that most of them are Ravenclaws and probably discuss every little detail of an assignment, but then you have the giggle factor. Doesn't that get on your nerves?"

"Honestly," Harry answered. "Yes. This year, at least. Last year it wasn't bad, but lately, well..." He trailed off looking frustrated. "She's my sister, and it's my job to keep her safe and know how she's doing, but she's got a lot of friends now and sometimes I feel like I'm intruding, or like she'll want to say something but doesn't want to say it in front of me."

"But really that's a good thing, right?" Cedric asked, also observing the group. "I know a little about how you guys used to live, always hiding, looking over your shoulder, that kind of thing. Now that things have settled down Row can make real friends and be herself, which was the goal to being with, am I right?"

"You're right," Harry agreed. "I like seeing her happy, and it's a small price to pay."

"It's really not surprising when you look at her friends," said Cedric. "Face it Harry, your sister is probably the most popular girl in her year, and as much as it may hurt to admit, she's growing up." Suddenly he chuckled. "I'm sorry to be the one to break this to you, but when girls hit Row's age there is a drastic increase in the amount of whispering and giggling that starts going on. Trust me, I'm speaking from experience." He paused for a moment. "Of course, it's also possible that all her friends have giant crushes on you."

Harry groaned. "Not you, too. That's what Blaise always says."

Cedric shrugged. "Well, you have to admit it's possible."

"I suppose," Harry admitted grudgingly. "I still think Row would say something if that was the case, though."

"Maybe she promised not to," Cedric replied. "Anyway, I've gotta run, and it looks like your study group is breaking up." Harry looked back and saw the girls were gathering up their supplies. "Anyway, I'll talk to Sprout tonight and find you at breakfast tomorrow. You can tell me what Sirius said and we'll decide where to go from there, sound good?" Harry nodded and made his way back towards the study table while Cedric walked up the hallway.

"Hey Harry," Row said as he approached. "The girls and I are going to meet up with Ginny and some other people in the Gryffindor common room." She looked at him apologetically. "You could come, but..."

"But it probably wouldn't be a good idea," Harry finished for her. "That's ok, have fun." Row smiled and gave him a hug before following her friends out of the library. Harry said goodbye to Padma and Hermione as well and waited for the group to exit before retaking his seat at the table to continue his reading.

Later that evening Harry was sitting in the Slytherin common room discussing switching spells with Tracey and Blaise when Daphne Greengrass sat down across from him.

“Hey guys,” she said to Harry and Tracey before smirking at Blaise. “Zabini.”

It was her usual greeting, mostly because she knew it annoyed Blaise, even if he didn’t show it. As usual, Blaise ignored her.

“Always so impolite,” Daphne chided, still smirking. She turned to Harry. “Any progress with the potion?”

Harry frowned. “Unfortunately, no. I’m probably not going to have a lot of time to work on it, either.”

“I figured as much, what with the tournament and all,” Daphne replied sympathetically. “Speaking of which, I heard you get to have dinner on the Durmstrang ship tomorrow. At least that should be nice.”

“I thought you weren’t sure if you were going,” Tracey said, turning to Harry.

“I wasn’t,” Harry replied. “But it turns out the invitation is legit, and Dumbledore’s going to be there himself along with Madame Maxime.” At Tracey’s questioning look, he shrugged. “I asked Sirius about it.”

“Too bad Moody isn’t going,” said Blaise. “With him and Karkaroff in the same room you’d get dinner and a show.”

“I think it’s really too bad they don’t like each other,” Daphne said thoughtfully. “I wouldn’t mind seeing how they teach Defense at Durmstrang.”

“Are you sure about that?” Tracey asked. “I hear the instruction there is brutal.”

“They learn a lot more though, too,” Daphne replied. “It’s hard, but at least they don’t have to wait until their fourth year to learn a decent curse. Merlin, we haven’t even been taught a shield charm yet!”

“Is Durmstrang that much better?” Harry asked skeptically.

“They let their students use dark arts in class duels,” Blaise broke in. “It’s brutal, but it’s also great motivation to improve your skills.”

“Class duels?” Harry asked, confused.

“Most schools have a dueling club,” Tracey explained. “Hogwarts used to have one, but it got abandoned for one reason or another. The Defense Professor in our second year actually tried to start one up, but he was a pretty incompetent teacher so the idea didn’t stick.”

“Does Beauxbatons have a dueling club?”

Tracey nodded. “Yep. Although theirs is a lot more formal, and they don’t allow dark arts.”

“In other words, Diggory better hope one of the tasks isn’t dueling,” Blaise said, grinning. “Otherwise Krum and Delacour will wipe the floor with him.”

“Harry would have to fight too, you know,” Tracey pointed out.

“Yeah, but something tells me Potter can take care of himself,” Blaise answered. “And that’s only if he can’t find a way out of the contract.”

“Hear hear,” Harry muttered.

“Well, I still think Hogwarts could learn a thing or two from Durmstrang when it comes to Defense,” said Daphne. “It’s too bad Dumbledore probably wouldn’t allow it.”

“Should he?” Harry asked, looked at Daphne intently. “Their headmaster is a Death Eater, after all.”

“Have you actually met Headmaster Karkaroff, Harry?” Daphne asked. Harry shook his head. “Well, you should meet him before you say something like that. There’s a reason he was still able to become the headmaster of Durmstrang, despite his reputation.”

“Reasons that may or may not include the imperious curse,” joked Blaise.

"That rather ironic coming from you, Zabini," said Daphne. "Your father's known him for some time, hasn't he?"

"My father knows a lot of people," Blaise said nonchalantly. "Karkaroff certainly isn't the only public figure that used to follow the Dark Lord."

"Sharing family secrets, Zabini?" Daphne quipped.

"Your family secrets, maybe," Blaise fired back. "By the way, how's your father?"

"Ok, that's enough," Harry interrupted sharply.

"Don't look at me," Daphne said innocently. "I just came over here to ask you about the dinner." She glared at Blaise for a moment before turning back to Harry. "You know, it's not surprising that people are afraid to approach you considering how Zabini jumps all over anybody who gets close. I was only trying to help." With a hurt look on her face, she turned and walked back across the common room.

"Trying to help Karkaroff, maybe," Blaise muttered at her retreating back. "I don't know why you even let her speak, Potter."

"I have my reasons," Harry replied. Blaise looked at him questioningly for a moment but said nothing, silently turning back to his book.

The next evening after his last class, Harry met up with Sirius in his teacher's quarters to prepare for the dinner.

"What am I supposed to wear?" Harry asked, opening his trunk.

"I'd go with your dress robes," Sirius answered. "Although since Dumbledore is going, you can probably wear just about anything and look normal if you sit next to him."

Thinking of the bright purple robes the headmaster had worn that day, Harry had to agree.

“So, what do you know about Karkaroff and Durmstrang in general?” Harry asked as he dressed.

“Not much that you don’t already know,” Sirius answered ruefully. “We thought he was the one that led the attack on the Prewetts in the first war, but we couldn’t prove it. I don’t know how he got off after the war, since I was, well, you know.”

“Supposedly he testified under veritaserum that he’d never led an attack for Voldemort,” said Harry. “And nobody every actually saw him, so they had to let him go. That’s the story I got, anyway.” He snorted. “Maybe I’ll ask him.”

Sirius looked at him worriedly. “Maybe I should go with you...” He said hesitantly.

“I’ll be fine,” Harry assured his godfather. “I promise. It’s not like he’s going to try something with Dumbledore and the other champions there.”

“I suppose,” Sirius said, although he didn’t look convinced.

“Trust me, Sirius, I’ll be fine.”

Sirius nodded reluctantly and Harry attached the Slytherin crest to his dress robes before making his way to the entrance hall to meet Dumbledore and the other champions. When he arrived, he found everyone else waiting for him.

“Well then,” Dumbledore said when he arrived. “Shall we be off?”

The group made their way slowly across the grounds with Dumbledore leading the way. Fleur and Madame Maxime followed together, speaking to each other in French, and Harry brought up the rear with Cedric. When they arrived at the Durmstrang ship, they made their way up the long gangplank onto the main deck, where they were greeted by a group of students dressed in their school uniforms. The students ushered them down a flight of stairs and into a long, elegantly decorated hallway that was lined with portraits of previous Durmstrang headmasters and famous alumni. The

atmosphere was very formal, especially in comparison to Hogwarts, as each portrait was surrounded by elaborate gold trim ornately carved with the crest or crests of its occupants. There appeared to be no other rooms at this end of the ship, so Harry assumed that the living quarters were in another section. As they walked, Harry came to the conclusion that the lower decks had obviously been magically expanded, as he was quite sure they would have already walked out the back of the ship otherwise.

At the end of the hallway there was a pair of large wooden doors inlaid with the Durmstrang crest. When they reached the doors, the Durmstrang students turned to Harry's group and took their coats before opening the double doors to reveal a large, formal dining area, complete with a crystal chandelier hanging overhead. Karkaroff was standing at the head of a very large table which was placed in the center of the room, with Viktor Krum standing to his right.

"Thank you everyone, for coming," Karkaroff said as they entered. He motioned for everyone to sit down and took his own seat at the head of the table. Cedric and Harry took seats along the right side of the table with Krum, while Madame Maxime and Fleur sat across from them and Dumbledore sat at the far end of the table opposite Karkaroff. "Let me take this opportunity to congratulate our worthy champions and wish them the best of luck in the months to come," Karkaroff continued, raising his glass in tribute. "I hope you all take this opportunity to learn a little more about each other in relaxing environment. Please, enjoy."

Harry's eyes flashed to Dumbledore as a number of Durmstrang students began to serve the meal. The Hogwarts headmaster was smiling politely, but his eyes never left his Durmstrang counterpart.

"So, Miss Delacour," Karkaroff said cordially. "What do you think of Hogwarts so far?"

Fleur smiled condescendingly. "Eet is ok, I suppose, but certainly eet is not a match for the beauty of Beauxbatons."

Dumbledore chuckled. "In this case I think you may find that beauty truly is in the eye of the beholder Miss Delacour," he said, eyes

twinkling at her merrily. "By the end of your time here, you might be surprised."

"I can't imagine going to school anywhere else," Cedric said honestly. "No offense to our guests, but I'd never want to go anywhere but Hogwarts."

"A very loyal sentiment," said Karkaroff. "But then, that is what the Hufflepuff house is known for, is it not?"

Cedric nodded. "It is."

"A noble quality, to be sure," said Karkaroff. "I look forward to seeing how well they teach you at Hogwarts these days." He paused for a moment before continuing. "I hope they teach you well, for Mr. Potter's sake. It is no small disadvantage he faces competing against students so much older than him."

"Perhaps," Dumbledore said, inclining his head slightly. Harry noted with interest that his eyes were no longer twinkling. "Mr. Potter will simply have to do his best, as will the other champions."

"Of course," said Karkaroff agreeably. "But given the curriculum at Hogwarts, I can't help but wonder if he has the necessary tools to complete the task ahead of him."

"He is sitting right here," Harry said irritably. "And he is still trying to fix the mess that the rest of you created by agreeing to a tournament without looking at the rules first. Hopefully he will find a way to remove himself from the competition before the first task."

"Such impudence," Madame Maxime said, harrumphing loudly.

Karkaroff considered Harry for a moment before nodding seriously. "I apologize for speaking above you, Mr. Potter, I meant no disrespect. I was merely wondering if the rather limited nature of teaching at Hogwarts would be a hindrance to you."

"I'm not sure what you mean," said Harry, looked at Karkaroff questioningly.

"Our students are quite happy with the curriculum here, Igor," Dumbledore broke in, leveling a steely gaze at Karkaroff. "And more importantly, so are their parents."

"Parents are often fools," countered Karkaroff. "It is our responsibility to see that our students learn the ways of magic, no more and no less."

"Ah, but part of being a wizard is learning how to use that power responsibly," said Dumbledore. "A lesson some students refuse to learn."

"Perhaps they simply learn it differently," Karkaroff replied. Suddenly he smiled apologetically to the rest of the table. "An old argument, I'm afraid. Headmaster Dumbledore doesn't believe his students capable of handling the more powerful branches of magic, at least not until they have properly learned their responsibility to their fellow wizards."

"Dark magic is not more powerful, Igor, only more dangerous," Dumbledore said sagely.

"You are quite wrong," Karkaroff replied in the same tone. Harry had to repress a snort at that, since the last statement sounded exactly like something Dumbledore would say. "In any case," Karkaroff continued, turning to Harry. "In the event that you do remain in the tournament, Mr. Potter, how do you think you will fare against your competitors?"

Harry shrugged. "I haven't a clue."

"He should not be in the tournament at all!" Madame Maxime muttered.

"Well, I for one think Harry has a pretty valid point," Cedric spoke up. "It certainly isn't fair to make him compete against his will just because somebody made a mistake with the Goblet of Fire. If I were him, I'd be mad too."

"We can only hope a solution can be found," Dumbledore interrupted gently. "One that satisfies us all." He chuckled. "And I wouldn't count our Mr. Potter out yet. He is quite advanced for a fourth year student."

Madame Maxime sniffed. "Fleur Delacour is ze finest student I 'ave ever taught," she said, looking her student fondly. "There will be no surprises."

"Indeed, I have heard of Miss Delacour's exploits," Karkaroff said, eyeing the young woman shrewdly. "The first sixth year student to ever receive the coveted Vilfor Achievement Award, no?"

Madame Maxime nodded proudly. "And ze first two time winner, after zis year."

"Madame is too kind," said Fleur. She smiled at the rest of the table and immediately Harry felt the first traces of veela charm. He narrowed his eyes and glared just as Fleur's gaze reached him, and he was surprised to see a look of embarrassment flash across her face and felt the veela charm stop abruptly. Next to Harry, Cedric was looking around confusedly.

"Your father must be quite proud," Dumbledore said, smiling gently in Fleur's direction. At the mention of her father, Fleur's whole demeanor softened, but only for a moment. "It is, after all, quite an honor."

"Eet is ze highest honor in France," Madame Maxime declared. "Miss Delacour is already well beyond the standard seventh year material in nearly all subjects, and will no doubt receive the award again this year." She beamed at Fleur.

"A most impressive feat," said Karkaroff. "We have a similar award at Durmstrang, though it is far less public. Viktor has a good chance of earning the honor himself."

The rest of the table looked at Krum, whose only response was a surly nod.

"They sound like parents bragging about their children," Cedric whispered to Harry as Madame Maxime and Karkaroff discussed the merits of their respective country's awards. Harry could tell that his friend was a little nervous, but he was hiding it well.

"I think they're trying to show Dumbledore up with their students' accomplishments," Harry whispered back. "Either that, or they're trying to intimidate you."

"Eet is impolite to whisper like zat," Fleur interrupted from across the table. "What is so important?"

Looking up, Harry noticed that all eyes were fixed on the two of them. Next to him, Cedric squirmed and opened his mouth to respond but Harry beat him to it.

"I apologize, we meant no disrespect," he said politely. "We were merely wondering about Headmaster Karkaroff's earlier statements regarding Hogwarts having a limited curriculum in comparison to other schools."

Karkaroff regarded Harry thoughtfully for a moment before his eyes flashed to Dumbledore and he shook his head slightly. "Another time, perhaps, Mr. Potter," he said finally. "I don't believe it is proper dinner conversation."

Harry nodded and turned back to his food. It was obvious that the Durmstrang Headmaster didn't want to continue the discussion in front of Dumbledore, who was still observing the situation silently. Considering that it had been Karkaroff who had brought up the topic in the first place, Harry could only assume that the two headmasters had some sort of battle of wills over whether or not to discuss the issue, and that Dumbledore had won.

"So, Miss Delacour," said Cedric with a friendly smile. "What can you tell us about Beauxbatons?"

The group continued to make small talk throughout the rest of the meal and through dessert, mostly about the differences between the schools and each champions various achievements. Fleur, it turned

out, was nothing short of a prodigy, and had chosen to stay in school for her seventh year only to take private classes with the Beauxbatons instructors. Harry watched as Madame Maxime expounded yet another of the blond girl's virtues, and he had to admit that the part-veela was rather interesting. She was obviously fiercely proud of herself and her achievements, but there was something strange that would come over her every time she looked at Harry, Cedric, or occasionally Krum. She hadn't released her Veela charm since the beginning of dinner, but it was obvious to Harry that she was concentrating very hard on something while talking to him and Cedric, and by the middle of the meal it was clear that she was actively avoiding eye contact with both of them. What Harry didn't know was why.

"Well, I do believe it is getting rather late," Karkaroff said once the dessert dishes were cleared. "I hope this was an enlightening experience for our champions. Good luck to you all." With that, Harry and the others were ushered out of the Durmstrang ship and back out onto the Grounds.

"Do you know where the Beauxbatons students are staying?" Cedric asked in a whisper as they walked back toward the castle.

"Not a clue," Harry replied. "A separate wing in the castle, maybe?"

"Wherever it is, I wouldn't mind finding out, know what I mean?" Cedric asked with a goofy grin. "She's really something, huh?" Suddenly he frowned. "You don't think that's just the veela charm talking, do you?"

Harry shook his head no. "Actually, I'm pretty sure she didn't use it at all during dinner," he admitted. "I don't know why."

"Really?" Cedric looked slightly relieved. "That's good to know." He smiled ruefully. "Doesn't it make it any easier to talk to her though?"

"If you're asking for advice, you've got the wrong guy," said Harry. "Jack's the one you should be talking to."

"Can't do it," Cedric replied, smiling. "He'd go straight for her."

Harry snorted. "No wonder she doesn't like me."

"What makes you say that?"

"Just that Jack's girls and I don't really get along," Harry said, shrugging.

Cedric just chuckled in reply as the group began to ascend the castle steps.

"Looks like that answers your question," Harry said, looking ahead to where Fleur and Madame Maxime were making their way into the castle. Dumbledore handed them a piece of parchment and the two walked up the nearest staircase and disappeared.

"So they are staying in the castle," Cedric mused. "That could be good."

Harry shrugged. "Or bad, depending on what happens."

Cedric laughed. "Very true. See you tomorrow, Harry." He clapped Harry on the shoulder and started up the nearest set of stairs that led to the Hufflepuff common room. Harry gave the grounds one last look before he turned and made his way down the familiar halls leading to the Slytherin dungeons.

Two days later at breakfast Harry received a reply from the wizarding historian he had contacted about the tournament.

Mr. Potter,

As per your request, I have located the original rules for the Triwizard Tournament and the Goblet of Fire. The full rules are enclosed should you wish to examine them yourself. With regard to your specific questions:

- Any champion chosen by the Goblet of Fire is magically bound to compete unless he is pardoned by the current head of the Grey Council. The Grey Council was a primitive governing body that was abolished in the 14th century, therefore there is no way for you to withdraw from the tournament without breaking the contract.

- The magical contract you entered into with the Goblet of Fire is binding. If you break the contract, you will receive the Macula Ignavus, or Stain of Cowardice, most commonly referred to as the Coward's Mark. The Macula Ignavus leaves a physical mark on the recipient's face, the exact form of which I have not yet found, although it is said to be permanent and completely resistant to all forms of removal, magic or otherwise. It was a mark of extreme dishonor in ancient wizarding cultures, so much so that it was decided that anyone bearing the mark was unworthy of learning the ways of magic. Therefore, every school that was founded before 1472 has written in its bylaws a restriction against accepting any student that bears the mark. Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang all have this restriction. The Salem institute, having been founded later, does not. Therefore, the statement that you would be unable to receive a wizarding education should you break the contract was technically correct if one considers only Hogwarts and the European schools.

My advice to you would be to simply compete in the tournament. The contract itself says nothing about the effort the champions must give, only that they must participate. Depending on the tasks, it may be feasible for you to simply show up and wait them out. A second option would be to convince the Hogwarts Board of Governors to amend the school's bylaws, since the restriction is certainly antiquated.

Should you have any other questions, feel free to contact me at your earlier convenience.

Sincerely,

Thomas Moore

"What the hell is all that, Potter?" Blaise asked, pointing to the stack of parchment.

"It's a letter from the historian I contacted about the tournament," Harry replied, frowning. "Tell me, have you ever heard of the Macula Ignavus, or Coward's Mark?"

Blaise shook his head. "No, should I have?"

"Probably not," Harry muttered. "Apparently that's what I get if I break the contract with the Goblet of Fire." He grabbed the papers in front of him and looked toward the head table. "I have to talk to Dumbledore, I'll see you guys in class." With that, he stood and walked purposefully toward the headmaster.

"What can I do for you, Harry?" Dumbledore asked as he approached. In answer, Harry simply tossed the letter from the historian on the table in front of him. Dumbledore read the letter and sighed heavily.

"I had hoped it would be better news," the headmaster said sympathetically, looking up at Harry.

"You and I both," Harry muttered. "What do you know about this Macula Ignavus?"

"Only what is already written here, I'm afraid," Dumbledore replied. "The mark went out of favor many centuries ago, and I'm not quite that old."

Harry ignored the joke and exhaled heavily. "So I'm pretty much stuck then. Break the contract and get some unknown mark, or be a champion."

"If you still wish to withdraw, I will convene the board of governors to amend the bylaws immediately," Dumbledore offered.

"I'd rather not have a strange mark permanently burned onto my face, actually," Harry said sarcastically. "So I'll participate in the damn tournament, but I want those bylaws changed anyway, in case I change my mind. I want something done with Crouch and the Ministry, as well, to make sure this doesn't happen again."

Dumbledore nodded. "It will be done. Once again I apologize, Harry."

Harry just snorted and turned to make his way out of the Great Hall.

It took a few days for the school rumor mill to confirm that Harry Potter would definitely be competing in the Triwizard Tournament despite his earlier objections; a fact that seemed to prove many of his skeptics right.

"I knew 'e was lying," one of the Beauxbatons students said to another as they walked through the halls of Hogwarts. "'E entered himself in ze tournament, zere is no doubt."

Overhearing this, Row growled and turned to say something when she felt a hand on her arm.

"Let it go," Harry told her calmly. "We'll see if they're still saying that after the first task."

Row turned to her brother with a confused look on her face. "What have you got planned, Harry?"

Harry grinned. "I said I'd participate, but I never said I'd compete."

Row laughed. "Oh, this could be good."

"What could be good?" Padma asked as she approached with Hermione.

"Harry's got something good planned for the first task," Row answered. "He won't tell me what it is though."

"How can you already have something planned?" Hermione asked. "Did they tell you what it is already?"

Harry shook his head. "They haven't, but it doesn't matter."

Row giggled. "Oh, this should be good. I can't wait to see the look on their snooty French faces."

"I'm still confused," said Hermione.

Padma nodded. "Me too, but I think that's about all we're going to get. Library?"

"Actually, I can't," Harry said hesitantly. "I have to get back to the dungeons. You guys go ahead, though."

Row looked at him funny for a moment before shrugging. "Ok, let's go girls."

Harry waited until they disappeared behind the nearest corner before he turned to walk the opposite direction. As he was approaching the stairs leading to the Slytherin dungeons he was stopped by a voice from behind him.

"Mr. Potter," the voice called. Harry turned to see Igor Karkaroff approaching him. "I hoped I would run into you," he said, stopping a short distance from Harry. "I just wanted to apologize personally, Mr. Potter," Karkaroff continued. "I just recently learned how seriously we wronged you by not examining the rules in proper depth."

Harry eyed the Durmstrang headmaster warily. "I appreciate your saying so," he said slowly. "But you're not the only one at fault."

Karkaroff nodded. "True, but that is not an excuse." He looked at Harry apologetically. "I also hear that the Hogwarts governors are refusing to amend the bylaws regarding the Macula Ignavus." He shook his head. "You have my sympathies."

Surprise flickered across Harry's face for a moment, and Karkaroff knew that Dumbledore had failed to mention that bit of news.

"I see Dumbledore didn't tell you," Karkaroff continued. "Perhaps he simply has not found the time. But let me assure you, Mr. Potter, if you decide to withdraw from the tournament and take the mark, Durmstrang will still be happy to have you. We would not let an obsolete rule prevent us from properly educating such a promising student." He paused and looked at Harry thoughtfully. "I doubt that Hogwarts will make the same promise."

“Durmstrang has the same restriction as Hogwarts,” Harry replied skeptically. “How do you know?”

“You will find, Mr. Potter, that the students and faculty at Durmstrang take their responsibilities much more seriously than their Hogwarts counterparts.” He held up a hand to forestall Harry’s question. “Not to say that your teachers are not serious about their jobs. But rather, what they consider teaching, we consider a poor attempt at a proper wizarding education. You remember the conversation we had at dinner about our ship?” Harry nodded. “At Durmstrang, we believe that all wizards, regardless of birth or blood, should be held to certain standards, and that those who lack either the power or the discipline to attain those standards aren’t fit to be fully qualified adults in our society.” He shrugged slightly. “It is an old argument, and your headmaster is quite opposed to that view.”

“How so?” Harry asked curiously. He was still on his guard, watching Karkaroff for any sudden or strange moves, but he was also interested in what the man had to say.

Karkaroff laughed mirthlessly. “Dumbledore would teach squibs, if he could. He sees magic as a right, I see it as a gift. A mighty gift with unlimited potential, and I teach it as such. I don’t believe in limiting a student’s education to simply “light” spells and techniques, if you believe in such a thing. For that, Dumbledore and those like him label me a “dark” wizard, because I embrace magic in all its forms.” He looked at Harry intently. “I embrace power, Mr. Potter, nothing more and nothing less. Tell me, how often have you been forced to sit through a lesson in which you had already mastered the material, simply because the majority of your classmates are struggling? Once? Twice? Daily?” He shook his head. “That is the problem, you see. By accepting any student with even a trickle a magical ability, you hold back those students that have the potential to become truly powerful wizards. Wizards like you, Mr. Potter.”

“You seem to be assuming an awful lot about me,” Harry said slowly. “How do you know I’m not just an average wizard?”

Karkaroff smiled. "I know potential when I see it, Mr. Potter. Unlike Dumbledore, I take my responsibility to our future generations seriously."

Harry's brow furrowed. "How so?"

"Albus Dumbledore is currently the most powerful wizard in the world," said Karkaroff. "He is the strongest not only in raw magic, but also in the knowledge and application of magic, and yet instead of attempting to impart the full extent of his knowledge, he limits the Hogwarts curriculum and expands its admission, resulting in generation after generation of weakening wizards. I can assure you that he did not learn all he did by waiting until his fifth year to learn a proper shield charm, Mr. Potter."

"Yet you still deferred to him at the dinner," Harry noted. "Why?"

"I defer to his power and knowledge because it exceeds mine," Karkaroff answered simply. He turned to look out over the grounds. "That may not always be the case."

"Is that why you followed Voldemort?" Harry asked.

Karkaroff whipped his head around to stare at Harry, his eyes cold and menacing. For a moment, Harry thought he had gone too far, but as suddenly as the dark look came, it vanished. Karkaroff continued to stare with an unreadable expression on his face for a moment before he startled Harry by letting out a small chuckle.

"Oh, very good, Mr. Potter," he said, still chuckling. "There are very few who would dare to ask me a question like that. Perhaps I have been too free with my tongue during this conversation?"

Harry shrugged. "I know you were a Death Eater, and you don't sound like a pureblood supremacy advocate, so it was obviously for some other reason. You respect wizards who are more powerful than you, which I assume Voldemort was. Am I missing anything?"

"Strange as it may seem, no," Karkaroff answered warily. "In fact, you are remarkably perceptive," he continued, eyeing Harry shrewdly.

“There are many wizards twice your age who lack your insight, and your courage. I think you would do well at Durmstrang, Harry Potter.”

Harry shrugged. “Perhaps.” He met Karkaroff’s gaze. “But you didn’t answer the question.”

“No, I did not,” Karkaroff agreed. “But of course, you didn’t really expect me to.” Harry just shrugged in response. Karkaroff regarded him thoughtfully for a moment before he seemed to come to a decision and reached into his pocket. Harry tensed, subconsciously preparing himself to shift into a defensive stance, but the headmaster only removed a shrunken book before holding it out to Harry.

“I’d like to have this, Mr. Potter,” said Karkaroff. “Consider it my way of making amends for what you’ve been subjected to because of the tournament.”

“What is it?” Harry asked, regarding the book warily.

“It’s a translated copy of the standard Durmstrang Defense textbook for sixth year students. It contains a number of spells you will not be taught here; spells that any true wizard should know.” He looked at Harry seriously. “You have too much potential to simply waste away in these halls, Harry Potter. True magic is unlimited, remember that.” He nodded towards the book. “If you have questions about that, I would suggest that you bring them to me, rather than to Dumbledore. He has tried rather hard to keep knowledge like this out of the hands of his students, after all.”

Harry looked at Karkaroff for moment before taking the book and placing it in his pocket. Karkaroff turned to leave and made his way back outside onto the grounds, leaving Harry alone to wonder what in the hell had just happened.

Harry spent the next day casting every detection charm he knew of on the book he’d gotten from Karkaroff, but found nothing out of the ordinary. For all intents and purposes, it was nothing more than an ordinary book, and Harry resolved that he would take a look at it later

that night. He was considering where he would try to read it during the middle of his potions class when the door to the classroom was suddenly opened and a very scared looking young Gryffindor walked in and asked for him. Assuming it had something to do with the tournament, Harry packed up his supplies and followed the boy out of the room.

"What's this for?" He asked once they were out of the classroom.

"It's, uh, pictures," the boy replied, caught between being awestruck and terrified. "For the Daily Prophet, I think."

Harry frowned, but said nothing as they continued their way upstairs.

They arrived at an empty classroom that had been cleared out to leave a large empty space in the middle. As he entered, Harry saw that Ludo Bagman was in the corner talking to a woman he didn't recognize while Cedric was chatting with Fleur Delacour in the center of the room. There was also a man with a small black camera seated in the corner who was trying to look casual and failing miserably, as he couldn't seem to keep his eyes off of Fleur. As Harry walked in, Cedric saw him and waved.

"What's all this about?" Harry asked, making his way over toward the Hufflepuff.

"Something about our wands," Cedric replied, shrugging. "I'm not sure what-"

"Ah, here he is! Champion number four!" A loud voice suddenly interrupted. Harry turned to see Ludo Bagman bounding towards him smiling jovially.

"Nothing to worry about, Harry, nothing at all," the large man said, clapping a hand on Harry's back. "Just the wand weighing ceremony. We have to be sure your wands are fully functional, you know, since they'll be your most important tool in the tasks ahead. Afterwards they'll be a short photo shoot. This is Rita Skeeter, by the way," Bagman indicated an older witch wearing bright magenta robes. "She's doing a small piece on the tournament for the Daily Prophet..."

"Maybe not that small, Ludo," said Rita Skeeter, eyeing Harry speculatively. She was a short woman, with a narrow face that contrasted sharply with her elaborately curled hair. She obviously spent a great deal of time on her appearance, and Harry couldn't help but think that the time could have been spent much more productively.

"I wonder if I could have a word with Harry before we start?" She asked Bagman. "The youngest champion, you know.... to add a bit of color?"

"Certainly!" Exclaimed Bagman. "If Harry has no objection?"

Harry opened his mouth but was cut off by Skeeter.

"Lovely," she said, grabbing Harry by the arm. She'd taken less than half a step before she suddenly lost her grip as Harry twisted his body slightly, leaving her hand grasping nothing but air.

"I never agreed to an interview," Harry said curtly. He narrowed his eyes at Skeeter. "And I'll thank you to keep your hands off of me."

Rita smiled sweetly. "Come now, Harry, there's nothing to be afraid of," she said. "Just a little background information, how you're feeling, that sort of thing. The public has a right to know."

Harry looked at her incredulously. "No they don't. I'm not supposed to be in the tournament at all. Somebody put my name in and made sure it got picked, and now if I quit I end up with some permanent magical mark on my face. You want to print something about me? Print that." Next to Harry, Cedric was grinning and Fleur was looking at him strangely.

"Whoa, not a fan of the press, eh Harry?" Bagman broke in jokingly. "That's all right, I'm sure he'll warm up to you Rita," he said, turning to put his arm around the reporter. "Now, did I ever tell you about the time..."

Bagman led off a visibly disgruntled Rita Skeeter and Cedric finally let out the laugh he'd been holding in.

“Good one Harry,” he said, still chuckling. “I don’t think she’s been told off like that in a while.”

“I wasn’t trying to tell her off,” Harry answered. “If she wants to print anything about me, that’s what it should be. None of this “youngest champion” garbage.”

“I agree, but that’s not really her style,” said Cedric. “You don’t read the Prophet, do you?”

“I read it occasionally,” Harry replied. “But most of it is crap, so I don’t read it very often.”

“Well, she’s had a couple of big articles recently,” said Cedric. “The stuff she writes is pretty nasty, and it’s always aimed at bringing down somebody who’s well-known. I’d be careful if I were you.”

Harry shrugged. “They’ve crucified me before, and they’ll crucify me again. I really don’t care that much.”

Cedric shook his head ruefully and was about to reply when the door to the room opened and the other judges entered, along with Mr. Ollivander.

“Ah, excellent,” said Dumbledore as he surveyed the room. “May I present Mr. Ollivander. He will be checking to make sure all your wands are in working order for the tournament.”

Harry and rest of the champions nodded before handing their wands to Ollivander one by one. He examined each wand closely, checking for scratches or imperfections, before performing a minor spell. There were no difficulties, and at the end he proclaimed that all the champions’ wands were in fine working order.

“Thank you all,” Dumbledore said, standing from his seat with the other judges. “You may return to your lessons, or perhaps it simply be quicker to go straight down to dinner-”

Suddenly the man with the camera cleared his throat loudly.

"Photos, Dumbledore, photos!" Ludo Bagman exclaimed suddenly. "All the judges and champions, what do you think, Rita?"

"Yes, yes," Skeeter replied, looking over the group skeptically. Her gaze flicked back to Harry. "Then perhaps some individual shots afterwards."

The photos turned out to be more difficult than anyone had anticipated, mostly because it involved getting Madame Maxime in the same frame as everyone else. When the photographer finally managed, Skeeter insisted that each of the champions be photographed individually.

"Actually, I don't think so," Harry said when she asked. "Like I said, I'm not even supposed to be in the tournament, and I really don't want my picture taken as a champion. Sorry."

"Oh, come now," said Skeeter. "It's just a little photograph, and I'm sure you'll look great." She reached out to grab a hold of Harry and once again found herself grasping empty air.

"That's the second time you've tried to grab me," Harry said, looking at her menacingly. "I told you the first time I didn't appreciate it."

"I never figured you to be so shy, Mr. Potter," Bagman said loudly, chuckling jovially. Harry turned to see that all of the judges and the other champions were watching the scene unfold between him and Skeeter.

Harry shrugged. "I'm not shy, I just don't want my intentions to be misrepresented. I'm a champion because of a freak accident, no more, no less."

"If Mr. Potter does not wish to have his photograph taken, I'm afraid you will have to do without," Dumbledore broke in, smiling benignly at Skeeter.

“Come Harry, are you certain you won’t change your mind?” Skeeter asked. Harry saw her eyes flick towards the cameraman for a just a moment, who gave an almost imperceptible nod back.

“If you’re thinking of taking a picture without asking me, be warned I’ll just destroy your camera,” Harry addressed the cameraman. “I saw that little order she just gave you, and I’m warning you: don’t do it.”

The cameraman looked visibly nervous, and he began to look back and forth between Harry and Skeeter.

“Why Harry, whatever are you talking about?” Skeeter asked sweetly. “We would never do such a thing! I’m hurt you could suggest it.”

Harry smirked at her. “Well, just to be sure,” he took out his wand and rapped himself on the head. Rita Skeeter gasped as his entire body suddenly seemed to blend into the room around him, and Cedric began to laugh out loud.

“You can take a picture now, if you want,” came Harry’s disembodied voice. Muttering angrily to herself, Rita turned to focus on the other champions.

Harry kept himself disillusioned and walked over towards the door. He noticed as he did so that both Dumbledore and Karkaroff seemed to have no trouble following his movements, and noted immediately that both must have some ability to see through such a simple disillusionment charm. He wondered if they would also be able to see through his personal invisibility spell, but he didn’t want to give away that particular ability yet. The disillusionment charm he’d used could be found in any number of sixth year textbooks, so it wasn’t that uncommon for someone his age to be able to cast it. True invisibility, on the other hand, was much more advanced.

When all the photos were taken, Skeeter and the photographer left, and Harry removed the disillusionment charm.

“An impressive little display, Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore said when he reappeared. “I don’t believe Miss Skeeter was quite expecting that level of opposition from you.”

"Well, now at least when she trashes me in the Prophet she won't have a picture to go with it," Harry said sarcastically. Cedric laughed again. Next to him, Fleur was looking at Harry quizzically.

"I do not understand," she said slowly. "Why not take ze picture? What can it 'urt?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't want to be advertised as a champion, especially not over Cedric, since he's the real Hogwarts champion. I don't want to be in the damn tournament, and I'd like to keep as low a profile as possible." He paused before continuing. "Also, I don't like her attitude. I think she wants to use me as some kind of poster boy, and I'll be damned if I let that happen."

Fleur smiled. "But eet is good to be popular, no?"

Harry snorted. "Not if you're me."

Fleur's smile changed to confusion, and then to frustration. Suddenly a mask seemed to come down over her face and she shook her head.

"I do not understand you, 'Arry Potter." She said softly. She smiled at Cedric, who smiled back. "I will see you later."

"Ok," Cedric replied, grinning.

The blond girl turned and walked gracefully away, knowing full well there were at least two pairs of eyes following her progress.

Harry and Cedric watched until she turned the corner before turning back to each other.

"Wow," Cedric whistled softly. "You know, I never really believed all the stories you hear about Veela, but I think maybe I do now."

"What, you think she's trying to seduce you?" Harry chuckled. "Not that you'd mind, of course."

“And you would?” Cedric shot back as the two walked out of the room and headed for the Great Hall. “I wasn’t the only one checking her out.”

“She does look good, I’ll give you that,” Harry admitted. “Although I actually think she’s looks better when she’s not using her charm, it’s too fake otherwise.”

Cedric snorted. “With a body like that, who cares?” Harry laughed and shook his head. “What?”

“You sound just like my brother,” said Harry.

“Well, great minds think alike, right?” Cedric replied, grinning.

“Jack’s a lot of things, but calling him a great mind might be a stretch,” said Harry. “Anyway, I thought you had your eye on Cho Chang, from Ravenclaw.”

Cedric nodded. “I do, but we haven’t gone out or anything. I was thinking of asking her to Hogsmede before the first task, but I haven’t decided yet.” He smiled ruefully. “Dating Ravenclaws can be dangerous.”

Harry shrugged. “So you say.” The two reached the entrance to the Great Hall and started to split up.

“See ya later, Harry,” Cedric said as he started toward the Hufflepuff table. Harry grunted a reply before walking over to the Slytherin table and taking a seat next to Blaise.

“What was all that about?” Tracey asked.

Harry explained what had happened at the wand weighing ceremony, including his antics with Rita Skeeter and the photographer.

“You disillusioned yourself?” Tracey said, laughing. “Right there while she was trying to get you to pose?”

Harry nodded. "I really don't like her attitude, either. Of course, I'll probably be rethinking that move when the Prophet comes out tomorrow."

Blaise nodded. "True. They can't have a slimy snake in their perfect little tournament, after all."

Harry frowned. "I don't think it was like that, it was more the fact that I'm the youngest champion and I'm already famous. I think she wanted to turn me into some type of tragic underdog story."

"How sweet," Blaise said sarcastically.

"My sentiments exactly," Harry muttered. "I get the impression that Rita Skeeter is going to find a story to print, whether it has any truth to it or not."

"Well, there's nothing you can do about it now," Tracey said reasonably.

"All too true," Harry replied, reaching for a glass of pumpkin juice. "And to tell you the truth, I don't really care." He grinned slightly at Tracey before taking a long drink. With the first task only a week away, Harry figured he should probably be nervous, but he wasn't. What would come, would come, and he had certainly faced much tougher things in his lifetime than a stupid tournament.

Who knows, he thought to himself. It might even be fun.

A/N Well, the stage is set. Harry will have to participate in the tournament, and yes they will be the same tasks as canon. Of course, his performance will be significantly different, and certain parties may have to take a more active role this time around if they want him to do well.....

Next chapter we see what Harry's got planned for the first task, and how he'll react to the unexpected task of finding a date for the Yule Ball. As always, thanks for reading.

The week after the weighing of the wands was rather tedious for Harry, mainly because of the article that appeared in the Daily Prophet the day after Rita Skeeter had tried to interview him.

Rather than a story on the tournament, the article she'd published was a twisted version of Harry's own history, with an emphasis on his "unstable personality." Blaise and Tracey had both gotten a good laugh out of that.

With the article once again making him a hot topic for the Hogwarts rumor mill, Harry had spent the majority of the week going through the book he'd gotten from Karkaroff. Blaise had gotten a glimpse of the book earlier in the week, and after careful consideration Harry had decided to let his friend in on this one little secret. Of course, once Harry had told him, he had insisted on seeing it for himself.

When the weekend finally rolled around, Harry decided to let him. He walked into the Slytherin common room and saw Blaise sitting in their usual corner. Crabbe and Goyle followed him into the room looking slightly confused, and Blaise raised an eyebrow in their direction as Harry made his way towards him.

"Uh oh, it's Dark Lord Potter," Blaise said, smirking slightly. "And it looks like you've already recruited your first henchmen," Blaise continued, gesturing towards Crabbe and Goyle.

"Those two?" Harry snorted and made his way over towards his friend. "Come on, the article said I was unstable, not stupid."

Blaise laughed. "Fair enough. 'An unstable teenager, cracking under the pressure of his tragic life, lashing out in anger at anyone who tries to get close.'" He smirked. "Sound about right?"

"Don't forget glory seeking," Harry added. "Or the part where she insinuates that I entered the tournament because I couldn't stand letting anyone else be the center of attention."

"Yup, looks like she's got you pegged," Blaise said with mock sincerity.

“Sod off,” Harry grumbled. Blaise just laughed as Harry surveyed the rest of the common room. “Where’s Tracey, anyway?”

“No idea,” Blaise replied. “I actually thought she might be with you.”

Harry shook his head. “I haven’t seen her since charms.”

Blaise shrugged. “She does disappear from time to time. She’s probably in the library or something. Speaking of which,” he looked at Harry questioningly. “Where were you last night? We ended up in the library and couldn’t find you anywhere.”

“Yeah, I was working on a few spells in an empty classroom,” Harry replied easily.

“What spells?”

“Nothing special,” said Harry, giving Blaise a meaningful look. “Just a few things out a new book I picked up.”

Blaise’s eyes widened almost imperceptibly. “Any progress?” He asked in a low voice.

Harry nodded. “A little. I’m going back tonight, if you want to come.”

“Yes,” Blaise nodded emphatically. “Definitely yes.”

Harry smirked. “I figured. I was going to ask Tracey too, but...” He trailed off and looked around the room again before shrugging. “Well, no time like the present, I guess.”

“Ok, let’s go.” Blaise packed up his things and followed Harry out of the common room and out into the dungeons.

“This way,” Harry said, starting up the stairs.

Blaise followed as Harry led them through a couple different corridors before finally stopping in front of a large oak door.

"This is where I've been practicing," Harry said as he opened the door to reveal a large but nearly empty classroom.

"Kind of bare, isn't it?" Blaise asked, surveying the room.

"Yeah, but I like it better that way," Harry answered, summoning one of the room's three chairs and placing it behind the only desk. "This way I can be sure that nobody else is using the room for anything, and nobody will know that I'm using it either."

"How refreshingly paranoid," said Blaise as he scourged one of the remaining chairs and sat down opposite Harry. "So, what's in the book?"

"There's a lot of standard material in it, actually," Harry said, pulling the object in question from his pocket and enlarging it. "Tips on silent casting and its strategic value, a couple of standard shields and a number of both curses and countercurses." He flipped to a page near the back of the book. "Then there's this."

"Shield Surpassing Casting?" Blaise read out loud. Suddenly he snapped his fingers. "Wait, I've heard of that. They call them something else too, right?"

Harry nodded. "They call them sliders, it's written here in the margin," he pointed to the book.

"Sliders!" Blaise exclaimed. "That's right, I've heard my dad talk about Aurors using sliders before, but I never knew what they were." He looked at the book for a moment before looking sheepishly at Harry. "So...what are they?"

"They're exactly what they sound like, actually," Harry replied wryly. "It's a way of casting spells that slide around any shield they touch and attack the caster. Essentially, they surpass shields by sliding around them, or at least that's what it looks like."

"What do you mean, that's what it looks like?"

“Well, here’s the thing,” Harry said, turning to indicate a passage in the book. “A slider isn’t really a spell until it hits a shield. The spell doesn’t really slide around the shield, it just looks that way because the spell is actually being created by the shield. You follow?”

“Absolutely not,” Blaise answered.

Harry sighed. “Ok, let’s see if I can explain this better. If I cast a slider at you and you don’t put up a shield, you know what happens?”

“Unless your aim is as bad as this explanation, I’d get hit,” Blaise said wryly.

Harry shook his head. “Wrong. Nothing happens. Nothing at all. By itself, a slider is worthless, it doesn’t have any power.”

Blaise frowned. “Then how-”

“It gets its power from your shield,” interrupted Harry. “Think of the slider as the spell you intend to cast, say a stunner.” He held up his right hand in a fist. “To cast it, you have to put some power behind it, right?” Blaise nodded. “Well, what a slider does is basically cast the spell, but leave the power out. So what you have is an unfinished spell flying through the air. “Then I put up a shield,” Harry held up his left hand, palm open, and brought his two hand together. “The unfinished spell hits the shield, but since it doesn’t have any power behind it, the shield can’t repel it. Instead, the slider takes power from the shield,” he spread his right hand out. “So your stunner uses the energy from my shield to form itself into a complete spell, and by the time it’s completely formed, it’s already bypassed the shield and hits me directly.” He slapped himself in the chest with his right hand. “You see?”

“I think so,” Blaise said slowly. “So can you make any spell into a slider? Why do we cast any other way?”

Harry shook his head. “It doesn’t work like that. Whatever spell you cast, the amount of power you can put into it is limited by the amount of power it can drain from the opponent’s shield, which, according to the book, isn’t very much. It’s enough for a stunner, or a light to

medium curse, but if you tried to use it with anything heavy, an unforgivable, say, the spell would fizzle out before it could form because there isn't enough power."

"So it's really more of a strategic skill, then," Blaise said shrewdly. "You cast three spells, one of them is a slider, and I don't know which."

"Actually, you can tell, if you look close enough," Harry answered. "He turned the page in the book and pointed to an illustration. "No matter what spell is chosen, its color will be muddled by small, black holes that appear when it's cast. It gives the spell a sickly looking color to it. It's not easy to spot, but it's there."

"Why?"

Harry shrugged. "Probably something about their being no power behind it, but I don't know for sure."

"I don't know if I'm satisfied with that explanation," Blaise said, frowning slightly. "I don't suppose you can cast one yet, can you? I'd like to see what it looks like for myself."

Harry shook his head. "I can't, but I can tell you for a fact that what the book says about the color is spot on."

Blaise looked at him quizzically. "How?"

"I've seen one," Harry said simply.

"What?! When?"

"When I dueled Snape, last year," Harry answered. "He used one on me. Of course, at the time I didn't know what the hell was going on; I thought he found a way around my shield."

"What did it do?" Blaise asked, looking at Harry intently.

"Screwed my arm up really good," Harry answered ruefully. "I think it was some sort of limb numbing hex, since I couldn't use that arm for

the rest of the fight, and Madame Promfrey said she had trouble healing it.”

“Sounds nasty.”

“It was,” Harry nodded. “Useful though. If he’d hit my wand arm I would have been in real trouble.”

Blaise grunted his agreement as he studied the Durmstrang textbook. After a moment he looked up and grinned.

“So, any ideas on how you cast one?”

Harry shrugged noncommittally. “A few, but nothing that works yet.” Suddenly he frowned. “There’s another problem, too. I asked Sirius if he knew anything about the shield surpassing technique, and he said that casting any spell as a slider is the same as using dark arts, and that the technique is restricted to Auror use only.”

“They’re dark arts, but aurors can use them?” Blaise asked skeptically.

“Yeah, that’s what I said,” Harry replied. “It’s stupid too, because it’s not even a specific spell. It’s just a different way of casting spells you already know. I could cast a cheering charm as a slider if I wanted to, so I don’t get it.” He sighed. “As much as I don’t want to, I think I’m going to have to ask Karkaroff, I’m just not sure how.”

“I won’t stop you, obviously,” said Blaise.

Harry snorted. “Of course you won’t, you want to know how to cast one as much as I do.”

“Too true,” Blaise replied, smirking slightly. “So get out there and learn so you can teach me, lackey.”

Harry smirked back. “Well, how about I teach you this one,” he asked, pulling his wand. “Apud Metus,” he muttered, slashing his wand in a roughly circular pattern around Blaise.

"Potter, wh-" Blaise's mouth suddenly clamped shut, seemingly of its own accord, and he began to look around the room wildly.

"What the hell is that?" He asked, sounding panicked. He continued to whip his head around the room frantically for a moment before he began to curl up into a ball on the floor and shiver violently.

"Finite," Harry muttered, giving his wand a quick flick. As quickly as the panic had come, it vanished, and Blaise looked confused for a moment before glaring at Harry.

"What the hell was that, Potter," he ground out, dusting himself off.

"That was what you get for calling me lackey," Harry said casually. "As far as I can tell, it imitates the effects of having a dementor nearby, although it's not as strong. It's actually cast on an area, not a person, which is why I thought it was interesting."

"I could barely move, you know," Blaise said, still glaring.

Harry shrugged. "You said you wanted to learn. Tell you what, if you get it right, you can cast it on me. Who knows," he grinned slightly, "maybe you could use it on Daphne sometime."

Blaise's glare suddenly turned into an evil grin. "Deal."

Harry and Blaise spent the rest of Saturday and most of Sunday trying to figure out how to successfully cast a slider, but to no avail. Harry had actually had more progress when he had attempted earlier in the week without using his wand, but of course he couldn't tell his friend that. After their Sunday study session, Harry decided he would have to bite the bullet and talk to Karkaroff.

Harry spotted him Monday morning at breakfast, and decided to approach him. He waited until the Durmstrang headmaster was finished eating before following him out of the room and into the Entrance Hall.

“Headmaster Karkaroff,” called Harry. Karkaroff turned just as he was about to exit onto the Hogwarts grounds.

“Yes, Mr. Potter, what is it?”

“I was hoping you could answer some questions for me, sir,” Harry said respectfully, pulling his wand to put up a silencing charm around them.

Karkaroff looked at Harry approvingly. “You work quickly, Mr. Potter, but I expected no less. What is your question?”

“In the book you gave me, there is a section on a technique called shield surpassing casting. I understand what the technique is used for, but I was told that only aurors are allowed to use it.”

Karkaroff’s expression darkened. “Says who?” He asked coldly. “Your Ministry?” He shook his head. “No, shield surpassing is a technique, an art, if you will. It is not a spell to be restricted, and even your Ministry cannot forbid it outright.” He scowled. “They can, however, restrict its teaching so that the only place in England it can be taught is at the Auror Academy, which is what they have done.”

“So it’s illegal to learn, but not to use?” Harry asked skeptically. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It’s illegal to teach, not to learn,” Karkaroff corrected. “Tell me, Mr. Potter, why would your Ministry do such a thing? Can you think of a reason?”

Harry’s brow furrowed for a moment, but Karkaroff chose to answer his own question.

“Could it be that they wish to give their aurors an advantage over the populace?” Karkaroff asked rhetorically. “Are they, perhaps, afraid that some normal citizens would be more powerful than their police force, and cause trouble because of it?” He snorted sharply. “I’m afraid it is nothing more than a corrupt practice to stunt the growth of young wizards in order to allow weak officials to remain in power.

How else would such a weakling like Fudge become Minister? It certainly was not through his achievements as a wizard."

Karkaroff paused before shaking his head slightly. "But I digress, you asked about the shield surpassing technique. As I said before, shield surpassing is as much an art as it is a skill. It takes intense concentration and an extremely thorough understanding of the spell you wish to cast. You are, in essence, separating the spell into separate parts, and even the slightest miscalculation could prove disastrous."

Karkaroff looked over his shoulder for a moment before continuing. "Most students find they cannot master more than one or two particular spells enough to cast them as sliders." Suddenly he grimaced. "Sliders. A crude name for such a complex technique, but I suppose it cannot be helped." He eyed Harry shrewdly. "For a fourth year to learn this technique is unheard of, but if you wish to try, I believe I have some other materials that can assist you." He paused. "You understand, of course, that the technique is best utilized with spells of a somewhat...darker.... nature that you are accustomed to."

"Why is that?" Harry asked.

"Simple strategy," Karkaroff answered. "Because the technique can only be used with less powerful spells, the spell must have a stronger effect to provide an adequate attack. You would not attempt to win a duel with tickling charms, would you?"

Harry thought about that for a moment. "I see your point," he said slowly.

"Good," said Karkaroff. "I will send a student to you." He nodded sharply and turned to leave.

"Headmaster?" Harry asked. Karkaroff turned around with one eyebrow raised.

"Yes?"

"You seem rather interested in helping me considering we've never met before," Harry said. There was no accusation in his tone, only curiosity.

Karkaroff was silent for a long moment, looking at Harry thoughtfully. "We are beset by a culture which bastardizes the ideals of magic," he said finally. "I do not believe that it is the destiny of the wizarding world to become the equivalent of a children's playground, where its citizens are capable of little more than using simple wand movements to perform the most basic of spells. Magic cries out to be understood, not just to be used," he said, his eyes burning. "I believe that you, Mr. Potter, have the potential to become a true sorcerer, and therefore I offer my assistance." He paused for a moment before continuing in a lower voice. "I can do no less." With that, he turned around and made his way out onto the grounds and towards the Durmstrang ship.

Harry frowned and considered Karkaroff's words for a moment. Although he still found it hard to believe that the Durmstrang headmaster had no ulterior motives in teaching him such advanced magic, Harry had to admit that what he said made sense. Of course, this only made him frown harder.

"I need to fly," he muttered, heading back to the dorms to grab his broom.

A few short minutes later, Harry was soaring in and out of the clouds above the forbidden forest, marveling once more at the total freedom he felt when he was in the air.

He spun into a tight corkscrew dive and pulled out just as he reached the tree line, skimming the uppermost branches with his feet as he passed. Laughing to himself, he shot into a vertical climb and then fell back off his firebolt into a free fall, summoning the broom back underneath him as he fell. It was his favorite move, partly because he liked the feeling of free falling, and partly because it was supposed to be impossible.

He knew that his firebolt had anti-summoning charms on it, and he also knew that they were far from weak, leaving him at a loss to explain how he was seemingly able to summon it at will. The only

thing he could come up with was that it didn't feel so much like he was actually casting a charm to summon the broom so much as he was asking it to come to him. He never felt like he was actively casting a spell when he summoned the broom, almost as if it was the magic in the broom that was doing the work. At least, that was the best explanation he could come up with. All he really knew was that it worked.

As he flew back onto Hogwarts grounds and started to circle down towards the pitch, Harry noticed a group of people that appeared to be clearing a section of the forbidden forest at the edge of the school grounds. It was obvious that they were preparing for something that would require a lot of room, but Harry couldn't imagine what it would be. He was, however, almost certain it had something to do with the first task. Smirking to himself, he decided it that tonight might be a good night for a walk.

That night, after everyone had gone to bed, Harry made himself invisible before slipping quietly out of the common room and into the halls. He made his way swiftly up out of the dungeons and out onto the grounds before heading towards the spot in the forest he had observed earlier. Despite the fact that it was a very cold night, Harry found that he enjoyed the peaceful quiet that permeated the grounds. It was very calming for him, and he found himself thinking he should do this more often.

When he reached the edge of the forest, he could vaguely make out what sounded like very heavy breathing from somewhere in front of him. Careful to remain quiet, he crept slowly through the underbrush towards the clearing,

"..all night?" He heard someone mutter. "It's not like they're going anywhere, they're out cold."

"You'd rather leave them unattended right next to a school full of children?" Another voice asked incredulously. Harry thought it sounded familiar, but he couldn't quite place it.

"I suppose not," the first man grumbled. "I still don't see why we had to make such a large clearing here, though." Harry slowly circled

around the voices to get a better look, but just as he entered the clearing, he froze.

Lying on the ground in front of him, limbs and wings strewn about haphazardly, were four very large dragons. Each appeared to be in a very deep sleep, and Harry realized that what he had heard before was actually the dragons' snores. Turning to his right, he saw that the voices he had heard belonged to two wizards who were currently sitting in large armchairs, each sipping a hot drink. One was middle aged and balding, and Harry was certain he'd never seen him before. The redhead, however, was far more familiar.

"They're going to put up a special arena just for the task," Charlie Weasley answered. "Something like a mini Quidditch pitch, with stands and everything for people to watch." He gestured towards the school. "Entrance over there, walls and wards for about 50 feet all around to protect the spectators."

"What's the actual task, anyway?" The other man asked. "Do you know?"

Charlie nodded. "They're going to put an extra egg in with the others, a special gold one, and the champions have to successfully get it out."

"They have to steal an egg?" The balding man asked incredulously. "From a nesting mother?" He whistled. "I don't envy them, especially whoever has the misfortune to go up against the Horntail. You know she almost got Randall with her tail last week."

Charlie nodded. "I heard. But knowing him, he deserved it." The other man laughed. "Still," Charlie continued. "I'm not sure what they expect us to do if things really get out of hand with her. Extinguishing spells are all well and good, but if any of the kids get hit by that tail..."

"I hear you brother," the other man said. "But we don't make the decisions. Just hope somebody good gets her, I guess."

Charlie nodded mutely, but still looked concerned. Harry watched for a moment longer before moving to inspect the dragons. He spotted

the Horntail easily enough, since it was the only one a tail lined with giant spikes. He recognized one other as a Welsh Green, but the other two were unfamiliar to him. Of course, he was far from an expert on dragons, having only read one or two short chapters on the creatures.

When he was satisfied that he could remember the distinguishing features on the other two, he crept silently out of the clearing and made his way back to the school. As he slipped into the halls leading back to the dungeons, he sighed. He absolutely refused to put on a show for Dumbledore and the rest with regard to the tournament, but he wasn't about to become dragon food either, which meant he would have to spend most of the following day researching each of the four great beasts.

Deciding it was better to be safe than sorry, Harry spent all his free time the following day in the library. He was engrossed in *The Great Book of Great Dragons* that afternoon when a thought suddenly occurred to him, and he abruptly packed up his things and walked swiftly out into the hall, making his way towards the Hufflepuff common room.

He was about halfway there when he spotted Hannah Abbott and another girl he didn't recognize walking in front of him.

"Excuse me," he called loudly. The girls turned around, looking startled. When they saw Harry, Hannah smiled slightly but the girl next to her paled and began to glance around furtively.

"Sorry to stop you," Harry said, stopping well short of the two just to be safe. "I assume you're going to your common room?" Hannah nodded. "I was hoping you could do me a favor and tell Cedric Diggory I'd like to talk to him."

"Uh, sure," Hannah replied, obviously confused. "You'll just, erm, wait here then?" Harry nodded and the two girls took a few steps backwards before turning and continuing towards their common room a little more quickly than before.

When they turned the corner ahead, Harry followed them slowly, careful to stay far enough behind them that they wouldn't notice. When the entrance to the Hufflepuff common room was in sight, he leaned against the wall to wait.

Cedric exited a short time later and, seeing Harry, made his towards him.

"Hey Harry," he greeted. "What's up?"

"I have a hypothetical question for you," said Harry. "Say that someone found about what the first task is going to be, and offered to tell you. Would you want to know?"

Cedric barked a laugh. "You already found out?" He shook his head in amusement. "Somehow that doesn't surprise me..." He trailed off and began to look thoughtful. "I don't suppose you know if Fleur and Krum know also, do you?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I don't. Sorry."

Cedric frowned and appeared to be debating the issue heavily before he finally sighed and grimaced slightly. "If everybody else knew, then I'd say yes, but if you're not sure," he paused before his face took on a determined expression. "I'd have to say no, I don't want to know. If I win, I want it to be an honest victory."

Harry nodded. "I expected you'd say that, but figured I'd give you the option."

"I appreciate it," said Cedric. "Do I even want to know how you found out?"

Harry shrugged. "Blind luck, actually. I was in the right place at the right time."

"Fair enough, I suppose," said Cedric. "Well, I guess I'll find out for myself tomorrow."

“True,” Harry turned to leave. “Well, I’m sure you’re busy preparing, so I’ll leave you to it. Until tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” Cedric agreed. He turned and walked back into his common room and Harry made his way back to the library to finish his research on dragons.

The next morning the entire school was abuzz with speculation about the first task and how the champions would fare. Harry, being used to such treatment, simply ignored it. From their nervous expressions, the other three champions did not seem to be faring as well.

The champions were excused from their morning lessons to give them and the judges ample time to prepare for the start of the task. Snape had handed Harry a piece of parchment at breakfast telling him when and where he was to meet the other champions that morning, scowling heavily as he did so. Harry was reasonably certain that his head of house was supposed to escort him there personally, but since he was quite sure that neither of them wanted that to happen he didn’t say anything.

As he left breakfast, he saw Row jump up from the Ravenclaw table and approach him.

“So, got your plan all set?” She asked, grinning slightly. “You know Jack’s coming out, so it better be good.”

“It’s nothing fancy,” warned Harry. “But it should be amusing, at least.” He leaned closer and lowered his voice. “Just be sure you’re all sitting in the visitor’s section farthest from the beast.”

“Beast?!” Row squeaked, suddenly looking nervous.

Harry smirked. “You’ll see once you get out there.”

“Harry-” Row growled warningly, but he was already walking out of the hall.

He made his way out of the school and out onto the grounds, taking nearly the same path he had when he'd discovered the dragons before. As he approached the area they had been held in, Harry could see that a very large tent had been erected directly in front of the forest, obscuring the dragon holding area. Behind the tent, he could just make out the outline of a large structure that he assumed would be the arena that Charlie Weasley had mentioned two nights previous.

"Ah, Harry!" A loud voice suddenly startled him back to the present and he saw Ludo Bagman approaching. "Good to see you, my boy, good to see you. Now," he said, lowering his voice. "Got everything worked out, no problems?"

"I'll be fine, Mr. Bagman," Harry replied, glancing towards the open tent.

"Come now, call me Ludo," Bagman said jovially. He leaned forward conspiratorially. "And if you need anything, anything at all, you just let me know. Now then," he straightened up and began to lead Harry toward the tent. "Time to join your fellow champions, eh?"

Harry followed Bagman into the tent and found the other champions already there, each looking significantly more flustered than normal. Cedric was pacing animatedly around the outside of the tent, muttering to himself while Fleur seemed to be unable to decide whether she should be standing or seated, and couldn't stop fidgeting. Krum was looking surly, as usual, but Harry could tell that he looked much paler than normal, and there was sweat on his brow. Harry himself felt only a mild sense of anticipation, and that was more because of the inherent uncertainty that came from dealing with dragons than from any desire to perform well in the task. In fact, he was planning to do quite the opposite.

"Well then, if all the champions are here then Mr. Bagman will explain the rules," Mr. Crouch said as he entered, followed by the rest of the judges. Harry thought his voice sounded strange, certainly much more robotic than the last time he'd heard him, but shrugged it off as nerves. The tournament was obviously a big deal to the man, and he'd already screwed up once.

“Too kind of you, Barty old boy,” Bagman said, grinning. “Now then, in a moment, I’m going to ask each of you to draw an item of this bag I’m holding. There are different, er, varieties, you see.” He held up a small silk sack. “Now, once you’ve drawn the item containing your number, we’ll go in that order until everyone has had their chance. Now, the task, for each of you, is,” Bagman paused, presumably to build suspense, but Harry noticed that only Cedric seemed anxious to hear what the man had to say. “To collect the golden egg!” Bagman suddenly roared. Fleur and Krum continued to look resigned and nervous, while Cedric just looked confused. “Now then, ladies first,” Bagman said, holding the bag out to Fleur.

Fleur reached into the bag and pulled out a tiny replica of a Welsh Green dragon with the number two around its neck. Harry’s suspicions were again confirmed by the fact that she showed absolutely no sign of surprise. Krum was next, and drew the bright red Chinese Fireball that Harry had researched the day before, bearing the number three. He, too, showed no sign of surprise, and simply sat back down and stared at the floor.

Cedric shot an incredulous look at Harry before he put his hand into the bag and pulled out the replica of the blue-grey dragon that Harry had identified as a Swedish Short-Snout, the number one hanging around its neck.

Amazed at his luck, Harry reached in and pulled out the final replica; the Hungarian Horntail bearing the number four. Bagman and the other judges seemed to be looking at him nervously, but Harry was actually quite pleased with his selection. The Horntail was easily the most dangerous of the four dragons, and out of the four champions, Harry was certain to have the strategy least likely to put him in any type of direct danger.

“Well, then, there we have it,” Bagman said. “Mr. Diggory, you may enter the arena when you hear the whistle. Good luck to you all and-” Bagman suddenly stopped as he spotted Harry’s raised hand. “Uh, yes Mr. Potter, what is it?”

“Is there a time limit for the task?”

"Uh," Bagman turned to look at Dumbledore questioningly. "Well 45 minutes should be enough time, I suppose, but—"

"Forty five minutes?" Harry asked. "Ok, just wanted to make sure."

"Yes, well.... Right then," Said Bagman. He looked around dumbly for a moment before he turned and followed the rest of the judges out of the tent. When they had gone, Cedric immediately whirled to face Harry.

"Dragons! Merlin!" He exclaimed, resuming his pacing. "If I had known, I would have wanted to know, you know?" He babbled.

"Yeah, it looks like they both knew, too," Harry said, indicating Fleur and Krum. "They didn't look surprised at all."

"Merlin, what am I going to do?" Cedric asked worriedly. Suddenly he stopped pacing and took a deep breath. "Ok, this is stupid," he reprimanded himself. "Right then," when he turned back to Harry, his face was set in determination. "Good luck, Harry."

"You too, Cedric," Harry replied, watching as his friend turned to stare at the exit. Suddenly a whistle sounded and Cedric took another deep breath before he began to walk determinately into the arena.

Harry turned and flopped down in the nearest chair, looking bored. He caught Fleur's eye and she looked at him incredulously. She looked like she was about to say something, but suddenly decided against it.

"What is it?" Harry asked, locking eyes with her. She glared at him and continued to fidget.

"Suit yourself," Harry said, shrugging. "But you really should calm down."

"I am perfectly calm," Fleur replied. She suddenly stopped fidgeting and began to look much more confident. Harry might even have believed her if she hadn't responded so quickly. Still, he had to admit

he was impressed by her ability to mask her feelings as well as she did.

"Of course you are," Harry said agreeably. "I mean, you've had plenty of time to prepare for this, and you have a plan that you know will work if you do it right, so what's there to worry about?" He shrugged. "It can't be the first challenge you've ever faced."

Fleur's face seemed to darken for a moment. "Certainly not," she said.

"So like I said, you've got nothing to worry about," said Harry. He wasn't quite sure why he was helping the French girl, other than the fact that it looked like she needed it. Then again, he was bored, and it definitely beat listening to Bagman's undoubtedly exaggerated commentary. "Concentrate on your goal, and everything else will fall away."

Fleur looked at Harry strangely, her face a mask of indifference. The two locked eyes again and remained that way until Fleur's entire body seemed to relax slightly and she looked away. "Thank you, 'Arry Potter," she said finally, her voice steady. She looked like she wanted to say more, but again decided against it, and gave Harry a respectful nod before taking a seat near the front of the tent.

A few short minutes later, there was a loud roar from the crowd outside, and Harry could hear Bagman exclaiming that Cedric had captured the egg. The noise died down as the judges scores were displayed, and there was a slight pause before the whistle sounded again and Fleur began to make her way toward the doorway. She paused right before she exited and looked back at Harry, who was still looking bored, before her eyes lit up with determination and he slipped out into the arena.

Harry looked over at Krum as Bagman began his commentary again ("ooh, that was daring" and "it doesn't get much closer than that!" Being his two favorite exclamations), and saw that the sullen expression on his face had not changed, nor had his eyes moved away from the same spot on the ground. Shrugging, Harry flopped back in his chair and tried to make out what was happening in the arena.

After about five minutes, the crowd again began to roar with approval as Fleur captured her egg. Harry was slightly surprised, since she had to have beaten Cedric but almost ten minutes. Finally, the whistle sounded again and Krum jerked to his feet and walked into the arena. Watching him, Harry had to respect his all business approach. Once he was out in the arena, the Durmstrang champion took even less time than Fleur, and soon enough Krum had received his scores and the whistle blew a fourth time, signaling Harry's turn.

Harry stood and made his way leisurely to the exit before throwing the flap open with a flourish and walking out into the arena. It was just as Charlie Weasley had described it: a near perfect circle about 50 feet in diameter, with grandstand seating all around. Harry paused as he entered, feeling for the wards that were there to protect the spectators, and he respectfully noted that there were quite strong. Much stronger than anything he could manage, certainly.

At the opposite end of the arena was, as expected, the Hungarian Horntail. The dragon was currently hunched over its eggs and was eyeing Harry suspiciously, but had not yet made any overtly hostile action, which suited Harry just fine.

Harry glanced around the arena, taking in the expectant faces of both students and parents, and smirked. He pulled his wand with a flourish and leveled it at the Horntail, causing the crowd to gasp, before he lowered his hand to waist height and began to move his wand back and forth in an extremely intricate pattern. As he did so, it became clear to the hushed crowd that he was conjuring something, as two long, silver bars began to appear. Harry continued to move his wand about, his face a mask of concentration, as the object began to form. The crowd waited with baited breath, many a patron on the edge of their seat, to see what weapon Harry Potter would summon to battle the great beast.

The silence was so tense you could have heard a pin drop, and it was all Harry could do to keep from laughing out loud. The wand movements were completely unnecessary, of course, but he wasn't adverse to some theatrics if they helped him get his point across. He flashed his wand upwards before bringing it down viciously in a

slashing motion. There was a small pop and a flash of light, and every person in the arena leaned forward to get their first glimpse of Harry Potter's conjured weapon. There was a collective intake of breath as the light receded to reveal....

A lawn chair.

For a moment, confusion seemed to ripple through the crowd, but it was quickly dispelled when Harry flopped down happily in his new creation before flicking his wand towards the castle.

"Accio cooler and books," he said clearly. The crowd began to mutter as two objects hurtled over the arena wall before stopping obediently next to the lounging Harry Potter. Harry reached into the cooler and grabbed a plastic bottle of muggle soda before leaning back and placing it in his right cup holder. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a pair of sunglasses, leaning back comfortably as he opened the soda. He raised the open bottle towards the dragon like a toast before taking a long pull and letting out a satisfied sigh.

"Yeah, that's good," he said to himself. Across from him, the dragon continued to hunch over its eggs, its head continually scanning the arena for threats to its potential offspring.

It took almost a full five minutes for the booing to start. It began with the Gryffindors, of course, but it wasn't long before most of the arena had joined in.

"Time for the fun part," Harry whispered to himself. "Avis," he muttered, flicking his wand slightly. A group of six bright yellow birds emerged from the tip of his wand and began to circle the air about him. He repeated the spell twice more before he enlarged each of the birds slightly, finishing with a group of eighteen yellow birds about the size of a seagull. With another flick and a mental command, he sent the birds towards the Horntail.

The assembled crowd had stopped booing, and was now watching the birds as they approached the dragon. A few of the spectators were openly laughing at such a futile attempt to distract the dragon,

but of course, they hadn't spent the entire day previous reading about the habits of this particular species.

As it was, the nesting Hungarian Horntail had a trait that was relatively common in dragons in that it absolutely refused to allow any other creature to occupy its airspace. Whether it was big or small, threatening or harmless, the Horntail didn't care. If it got close, it was dealt with. And for Harry, the manner in which it was typically dealt with should prove highly entertaining, especially with a booing crowd.

Harry sent another mental command to the birds that were now spread out in a line slightly in front of the dragon. He had to concentrate to do it, since the distance was rather long, but immediately three of his birds obeyed the command and dove straight toward the Horntail's left flank. The dragon snapped its jaws in warning, and the birds scattered for a moment before they began to dart in and out of the vicinity. As the Horntail began to get visibly agitated, Harry sent three more birds directly towards it from the same side. The dragon let out a loud roar and reared its head back before letting loose a vicious jet of fire at the offending birds. Two of the birds were able to escape the blast while the other four were incinerated almost instantly, but Harry hardly noticed. He was watching the spectators.

As he'd hoped, the Horntail's position at the far side of the arena made it possible for the dragon's fire to directly impact the shielding wards that had been placed above the walls. The spectators, seeing a vicious blast of dragonfire heading straight for them, naturally began to panic, and the students began to scramble over each other to get out of the way. The fire impacted harmlessly on the wards surrounding the arena, which, although they shuddered slightly, held firm. Harry smirked when he saw that at least one of the Weasley twins had ended up sprawled in the aisle as a result of the chaos in the stands. He knew it would be a good idea to target the Gryffindor section first.

With another mental command, Harry ordered the entire flock to engage from all sides, resulting in an extremely agitated Horntail that began to lash out in nearly every direction, including directly at the judge's booth, which was situated behind it. Harry laughed out loud

when Ludo Bagman shoved Rita Skeeter into Barty Crouch before diving behind Dumbledore. It would only work once, Harry was sure, but once had certainly been worth it.

By the time the seventh blast hit the wards, Harry noticed that they seemed to shudder much more than he was comfortable with, and reluctantly dispelled his four remaining birds. He supposed it was just as well, since he was no longer getting the same reaction now that everybody in range had been targeted at least once. A number of spectators, especially the parents, were glaring at him with disapproval in their eyes, but he simply ignored them and returned to his soda.

Ripples of outrage began to make their way through the crowd as Harry pulled out one of the books he'd summoned and began to read. He checked his watch and saw that he still had twenty minutes remaining until the time limit was up, and wondered if they would have the guts to start booing again.

When the time limit had finally been reached and none of the judges had made an announcement, Harry caught Bagman's eye and tapped his watch impatiently. Bagman looked like he had just swallowed something distasteful as he turned to Dumbledore, who slowly got to his feet and amplified his voice.

"I'm afraid the time limit for this task has been reached," he said loudly. "Mr. Potter will now receive his scores from the judges."

Harry popped up to his feet and vanished his conjured chair, throwing his empty soda back in the cooler as he did so. He turned to face the judges, and waited.

Madame Maxime held her wand in the air first and fired out what appeared to be a silver ribbon that formed itself into the number 1. Mr. Crouch was next, and he shot up a 4. The crowd began to mutter angrily, but behind Crouch, Harry could see Mad Eye Moody nod slightly. Next was Dumbledore, who was looking at Harry with a mix between amusement and disappointment. He put up a 1. After Dumbledore came Bagman, who looked visibly nervous before suddenly letting out a jovial laugh.

"Well, can't say it was the best effort I've ever seen, but it was certainly the most entertaining!" He said loudly, shooting up a 7. The crowd roared with disapproval and began to shout at Bagman as Karkaroff raised his wand and put up a 1 as well.

"I still came out of that with 14 points?" Harry laughed softly to himself as he headed back towards the champions tent. He looked up toward the visitors section and found Jack and Row, still red faced from laughing, and waved. Nodding, they started to make their way out of the stands and down towards the champions tent to meet their brother.

"Harry, that was brilliant!" Jack exclaimed, slapping Harry on the shoulder.

"Oh, I think I laughed so hard I cried," Row said, wiping her eyes slightly. "Did you see Bagman?"

"How could I miss it?" Harry answered with a wry grin.

"...utterly disgraceful display," an old woman said loudly to her companion as she passed the group. "He should be ashamed of himself!"

Harry chuckled. "Think they'll believe I didn't enter myself now?"

"Yeah, I think you made your point," came the voice of Cedric Diggory as he approached the siblings from behind.

"You didn't do so bad yourself, man," Jack said, shaking Cedric's hand.

"I didn't exactly do well, though," Cedric said wryly. "Third place with 39."

"Really?" Harry asked. "What were the other scores, anyway?"

"Krum's in first with 42," Row replied. "He hit the dragon right in the eye with a spell and grabbed the egg straightaway. Whatever he hit it

with must have hurt, because the thing started stumbling around in agony and squashed a few of the regular eggs. The judges took points off for that.”

“Fleur is second,” Cedric put in. “I actually have no idea exactly what she did, but she used some sort of trance spell to put the dragon to sleep. It worked really well, but it started snoring and let out a burst of fire that got her. The judges gave her 41.”

“Forty two, huh?” Harry said thoughtfully. “So, think I’ve still got a chance?” The rest of the group laughed.

“Uh oh, incoming,” Jack muttered. Harry looked up to see Dumbledore and the other judges approaching him.

“Impossible!” Madame Maxime was stuttering. “E should be disqualified!”

“The rules are clear,” Crouch replied immediately. “He must continue, no exceptions.”

“Well then, I suppose we should give him the egg,” said Bagman.

“Do you honestly think that will make a difference,” said Karkaroff in a bored tone. “Mr. Potter has been rather adamant in his desire to remain as detached from the tournament as possible, despite your efforts to the contrary.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Bagman said, harrumphing loudly. “I just want to see a fair competition-”

“He must be given the egg,” Crouch interrupted. “The rules demand it.”

Dumbledore looked at Crouch strangely for a moment, and Crouch seemed to relax slightly.

“I apologize,” said Crouch. “I have been rather stressed of late. It is clear in the rules that each champion must have equal opportunity to

prepare for the tasks, ergo Mr. Potter must be given the egg.” Dumbledore nodded and turned his gaze back to Harry.

“Well, there you have it,” Bagman said, coming forward to hold out the golden egg to Harry, who took it. “That was an entertaining little stunt, Harry,” Bagman continued. “But don’t think it will work twice! Next time you’ll have to do a bit better!”

Harry looked at the man skeptically for a moment, but said nothing. Bagman cleared his throat uncomfortably before he spotted someone he knew and made a hasty exit. The rest of the judges bid Harry a good day before they, too, left and continued up towards the castle. As they left, Mad Eye Moody stepped out from behind the champions’ tent and walked towards Harry.

“Potter,” he said gruffly. “I was hoping I could have a word.”

“Certainly, Professor,” Harry said, following the ex-auror into the champions tent.

“Quite a little show you put on there, Potter,” Moody said gruffly. “And damn fine thinking, too. Whoever put your name in the cup certainly couldn’t have been expecting that.”

“My thoughts exactly, sir,” Harry replied.

“I assume you’ve got something similar planned for the other two tasks?” Harry nodded. “Well, like I said, I like the way you think. Still, whoever put you in for it might try something else. It wouldn’t be hard with all the excitement.”

Harry frowned. “I hadn’t considered that,” he admitted.

“Constant vigilance!” Moody barked. “Always be looking ahead. The headmaster has asked me to be on the lookout as well. To watch your back, as it were.” His blue eye began to spin around menacingly. “Believe me when I tell you there’s not much can get past an old watchdog like me.”

“I appreciate that, sir,” Harry replied. “Thank you.”

"No need for thanks, boy," Moody grumbled. "If you see anything strange, anything at all, you let me know straightaway." He said seriously.

Harry nodded and left the tent to rejoin his friends.

"What did Moody say?" Cedric asked curiously as they made their way back towards the castle.

"Basically the same thing I've been saying," Harry replied. "He believes that somebody entered me for a reason, and thinks they might try something different if they don't like the fact that I'm not really competing."

"Maybe somebody entered you to get a laugh," Jack suggested. He chuckled. "You certainly put on a show today."

"But what are you going to do for an encore?" Row asked.

Harry shrugged. "I'll figure something out." He snorted. "Of course, I'll start by completely ignoring whatever this clue is."

"Sounds like a plan to me," said Jack. He glanced at his watch. "Well, looks like my magic time is up for today," he said reluctantly.

"So soon?" Row pouted.

Jack nodded. "Yeah. But don't worry, it's not long until Christmas," he said as Row gave him a good-bye hug.

"That's true," Cedric said, shaking Jack's hand. "We should plan something over the break."

Jack shrugged. "You know I'm in. Who knows, maybe we can even drag this guy out with us," he said, punching Harry lightly on the shoulder.

"Depends on who's going to be there," said Harry as he and Jack shook hands.

“Well, I’ll get on it then,” Jack said. “Later.” He gave the group a wave as he turned and started to walk back towards Hogsmede. The other three resumed their walk back towards the castle before splitting up to join their respective housemates for the rest of the free day.

As he approached the Slytherin common room, Harry wondered what sort of greeting he would receive after the show he had put on during the task. He’d never caused the dragon to target the Slytherin student section, mostly due to the fact it was significantly out of range, but he was sure his performance still wouldn’t sit well with some of the older members of the house.

At least that’s what he thought. The cheers he received when he walked into the common room definitely said otherwise.

“What’s all this?” He asked Blaise, waving confusedly at the numerous students trying to congratulate him.

Blaise smirked. “Anybody who can send the Gryffs into that much panic, and in public no less, deserves a hero’s welcome.”

“Bloody brilliant Potter,” a sixth year said, clapping Harry on the back. Harry nodded politely back before turning to his friend and frowning.

“I know what you’re going to say,” Blaise cut him off. “But it doesn’t matter why you did it, the fact is that you had the ‘brave and noble Gryffindors’ scrambling over each other to save their own asses, and that’s a move every Slytherin has to respect.”

Harry thought about that for a moment before nodding slightly. “I suppose you’re right,” he said thoughtfully.

Blaise shook his head. “You remember what I told you on your first day?” He asked. “I told you that Slytherins have to stick together. You just reminded them of why you belong here, that’s all.”

Harry really had no reply to that, and settled for a grudging nod. The two walked over to where Tracey was seated and took seats on either side of her.

"I'd congratulate you, but it might be cliché by now," said Tracey, grinning slightly. "It was a good show, though. Anybody who still believes you entered yourself in the tournament is either an idiot or a Gryffindor."

"There's a difference?" Blaise asked jokingly.

"Of course not," Tracey answered. "I was just being thorough."

"Thorough or not, I just hope you're right," said Harry.

"Meh, what does it matter?" Blaise asked lazily. "Let idiots be idiots, I say."

"Idiots with wands can be dangerous," Harry muttered. "Never underestimate the power of stupidity."

"Well, that's what we have Karkaroff's book for," Blaise said, lowering his voice slightly.

Tracey frowned. "I still don't think you guys should be using that thing," she said slowly. "I'm not exactly a Dumbledore fan, but I certainly trust him more than somebody from Durmstrang."

"I don't know about that, actually," mused Harry. "The last time I talked to him I asked him why he was helping me, even though we'd never met."

"What'd he say?" Blaise asked interestedly.

"He said he thought I deserved to know," Harry said shrugging. "He said he doesn't like the fact that Dumbledore limits our education at Hogwarts because it produces weaker wizards, and doesn't allow the stronger ones to realize their full potential."

“That’s actually a pretty old controversy,” said Blaise. “In fact, it’s part of the reason behind the pureblood supremacy attitudes of guys like Malfoy. They claim that muggle blood dilutes the power of our magic, making us all weaker.”

“That’s total bollocks, though,” Tracey said quietly.

Blaise shrugged. “It’s never really been proven, one way or the other.”

“I don’t think he was talking about blood at all,” said Harry. “He was talking more about culture. In fact, he said that he believes that all wizards, regardless of birth or blood, should be held to higher standards of wizardry. Essentially, only the strongest wizards deserve to actually be considered wizards.”

Blaise shook his head. “Karkaroff might claim to believe that, but remember, he did follow the Dark Lord, so unless his philosophy has changed, he still at least partially believes that muggleborns should be exterminated.”

Harry frowned. “That’s true, but I get the impression that the he became Death Eater because he respected Voldemort’s power.” He paused thoughtfully. “I think it all comes down to power for him.”

Blaise shrugged. “He wouldn’t be the first. The wizarding world has always placed a high value on magical power. In some circles you can still legally settle disputes with a duel between opposing parties.”

“But if he only cared about power, why would he help you?” Tracey asked skeptically.

Harry’s frown turned thoughtful. “I can’t say for sure, but I think he feels obligated to,” he said slowly. “He said something about how he takes his job as an educator much more seriously than Dumbledore does, almost as if he feels it’s his duty to teach those he considers worthy.” He shook his head. “It’s a little confusing, and I still think he’s up to something more, but at the same time...” He trailed off. “I guess I just get the feeling that he’s telling the truth, and not to brag, but my feelings are usually right.”

"Look at it this way," Blaise broke in. "He's not asking you for anything, and the book he gave you is standard issue at Durmstrang anyway, right?"

"According to him, yes."

"And it's not like there's anything really nasty in it," Blaise continued reasonably. "It's got some dark curses in it, sure, but they're more attack spells than anything else. There are no torture curses in there, or anything that requires any type of sacrifice, so I don't see the harm."

"It's a slippery slope, though," Tracey cut in. "That's the harm."

Blaise shrugged. "Well, I guess that's what we have you for." He snapped his fingers. "I knew you were good for something!"

Tracey hit him playfully. "You're such a prat."

"You'll get no argument from me," came the voice of Daphne Greengrass as she approached the group.

"How about no words at all, can we get that?" Blaise asked.

Daphne just smirked at him before turning to Harry. "Can I talk to you for a minute, Harry?"

"Sure," Harry said. He got to his feet and followed Daphne a short distance away from his friends.

"Brilliant performance today, by the way," Daphne said as they stopped.

"Thanks," Harry replied. "I wasn't quite expecting such a warm welcome from the house, though."

"Well, that's kind of what I wanted to talk to you about," Daphne said hesitantly. "I mean, you've always been kind of an outsider, which

was a good thing when Malfoy was running things, but now..." She trailed off uncertainly and took a deep breath.

"What?" Harry asked, perplexed.

"It's just that a lot of our housemates would like to be friends with you, Harry," Daphne said slowly. "I know you've never been one to care about your reputation, especially since there are so many false rumors about you, but..." she shrugged helplessly. "I just really think it would be good if you talked to them."

Harry's brow furrowed in confusion. "Of course I'll talk to them. I don't see the problem."

Now it was Daphne's turn to look confused. "But, I thought you told Zabini to keep other Slytherins away from you."

Harry's eyebrows rose. "What gave you that idea?"

"Well, I just assumed," Daphne stammered, looking flustered. "I mean, he's been like your ambassador since you got here, and he's always the one saying who can and can't talk to you..." She trailed off and looked at the ground. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to insult you or anything."

Harry was silent for a moment, looking at her intently. "You don't have to apologize, Daphne," he said finally. "I was just surprised, that's all. Is it ok if we talk about this later?"

"Sure Harry, whatever you want," Daphne said. She gave him an apologetic smile before making her way back across the room and up towards the girl's dorms.

"What was all that about?" Blaise asked when Harry returned to his seat.

Harry considered his friend thoughtfully. He had been thinking about broaching the subject of Daphne Greengrass with Blaise on more than one occasion, but he hadn't yet decided how much to reveal to him.

“Just Daphne being Daphne,” Harry replied at last. “She threw a couple of good insults at you, of course.”

Blaise snorted. “Of course. Anyway, when did Karkaroff say he was going to give you those new materials?”

The two continued to talk about the spells from the Durmstrang textbook, but Harry knew he had only postponed the inevitable. Eventually, he was going to have to decide how to resolve the Daphne Greengrass issue, and he was going to have to decide soon.

“Well, I think I’m going to head to bed early,” he said with a yawn when the conversation had hit a lull. “I’ll need my rest if I’m going to avoid all the ridiculous prank attempts I’m sure to get from the Gryffindors tomorrow.”

Tracey laughed. “That’s probably true, good night, Harry.”

“Good night,” Harry replied. He made his way up to the dorms and set the wards around his bed before crawling in, doing his best not to think about what the Daily Prophet would write about his little stunt the following morning.

Amazingly, the next morning’s Prophet made no mention of Harry, and other than a botched attempt to slip something into his potion during the next day’s class, the Gryffindors left him alone. All in all, it seemed that the rest of the school had finally accepted that fact that Harry had meant it when he said he wanted nothing to do with the “damn tournament.”

Two days after the first task, a Durmstrang student approached Harry in the library and gave him two more books devoted completely to the theory and strategy of the shield surpassing technique. After another round of thorough detection charms, Harry and Blaise spent the next week trying to make sense of them.

By the second week in December, neither had successfully used the technique, although Harry had made significant progress, and could now cast spells that would begin to draw power from a shield before fizzling out.

"Well, at least it's improvement," Blaise said as they talked about it over breakfast. "I can't seem to do it at all."

"Well, it's supposed to be too hard for most students," Harry replied. "Which is bollocks, but it does mean it will probably be harder than anything else you've ever tried."

"I think I'm going to concentrate on the theory more," Blaise mused.

"That's one of the reasons I chose a Reductor Curse to start with," said Harry. "No sense in using a spell you don't know." He didn't tell Blaise his other reason for starting with the Reductor Curse, namely that it was a lesser blasting curse, and that he hoped the technique would be the same if he used it with similar but more powerful blasting curses later.

Blaise grunted in agreement and Harry was reaching for his pumpkin juice when a large brown owl landed directly in front of him and extended its leg. Puzzled, Harry took the letter and fed the owl a scrap of toast before opening it.

As his eyes scanned the letter, he frowned.

"What is it?" Blaise asked.

"Dumbledore wants to see Sirius and I this afternoon after class," Harry said slowly. "It doesn't say why, just that I should come to his office."

"Something to do with the tournament?"

"Maybe," Harry replied. "I did ask him to come up with a solution to make sure this doesn't happen again, so maybe that's it."

"Or Karkaroff set you up," Blaise said.

Harry nodded. "I was thinking that too. Well, I'll find out soon enough, I guess."

When classes ended later that day, Harry made his way to Dumbledore's office and gave the password to the gargoyle. He ascended the steps quietly before knocking three times on the large door.

"Come in, Harry," came Dumbledore's voice. Harry opened the door and saw that his godfather was already there. "Lemon drop?"

"No thank you," Harry politely declined.

"Very well, if you would have a seat," Dumbledore gestured to a chair and Harry sat down next to his godfather, who was looking somewhat upset.

"Now then," Dumbledore began, leaning back in his chair. "It has come to my attention that Headmaster Karkaroff has taken an unusual interest in you, Harry. For what reason, I cannot say, but I think it is important that you understand the true nature of who you are dealing with."

"I already told you, Harry's not dealing with him," Sirius said sharply. "He already knows all about what Karkaroff is."

"Actually, I don't," Harry said slowly. "I know he was a Death Eater, but I don't know why. He doesn't seem like a pureblood supremacist and he does seem rather anxious to talk to me, and I really don't know why." He looked at Dumbledore. "If you could tell me what you know about him, I would really appreciate it."

"Wait, you mean he's actually approached you?" Sirius asked angrily. He turned to glare at Dumbledore. "I don't know why you even let him come here, but if he's after Harry-"

"Calm yourself, Sirius," Dumbledore interrupted serenely. "I am quite sure that Karkaroff has made no attacks on Harry."

“How do you know?” Sirius asked hotly. “He could be the one that put Harry’s name in the goblet and made him enter the tournament!”

“I assure you, Igor Karkaroff did not approach the Goblet of Fire,” said Dumbledore.

“How can you be sure, though?” Sirius asked skeptically.

“You’re having him watched, aren’t you,” Harry said suddenly. “You have someone tailing him when he’s in the castle.”

Dumbledore turned to regard Harry thoughtfully.

“A most excellent deduction, Harry,” he said carefully. “You are, in fact, not far off.”

“That’s how you knew he had approached me as well, isn’t it?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore nodded. “It is. Although I do not believe that he harbors any ill will towards Hogwarts or its students at this time, Igor Karkaroff is not a man to be trusted, regardless of what position he may hold.”

“Tell me about him,” said Harry. “How is it that a former Death Eater is able to become the Headmaster of a school like Durmstrang?”

Dumbledore was silent for a moment as he considered his answer. Finally, he sighed.

“Igor Karkaroff was a Death Eater, that is true, but, as you have already so keenly observed, he does not hold the stereotypical Death Eater ideals.”

“He’s nothing more than a murderer, no matter what robes he wears,” Sirius spat disgustedly.

“It is true, he has no doubt committed numerous murders in his lifetime,” Dumbledore acknowledged. “His decision to sacrifice others to his cause is what I consider to be his greatest downfall, in fact.”

“What cause is that?” Harry asked. “If it wasn’t for Voldemort, then what was it for?”

Dumbledore sighed. “You will find, Harry, that there are those in our world who, for lack of a better term, believe that ‘might makes right.’ Essentially, that magical power should be the only determining factor in who deserves to rule. Igor Karkaroff is of this opinion.”

“He mentioned something like that to me,” Harry said cautiously. “He said that he believed that wizards were becoming weaker, and that they should be held to higher standards.”

Dumbledore nodded. “He has always held that belief, even when he was young. The idea is an old one, that it is better to have 2 master wizards than 20 merely competent ones. It is also an idea I have strongly opposed.”

“Why is that, sir?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore leaned back slightly. “You will find, Harry, that the statement ‘power corrupts’ is just as true for wizards as it is for muggles,” he said slowly. Suddenly he stood and made his way over to Fawkes’s perch. “You are familiar with the rest of the saying, I assume?”

Harry frowned but nodded. “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

Dumbledore nodded sadly as he stroked Fawkes’s plumage. “Now tell me, Harry, can you think of any greater corruption than for us to decide who is worthy of learning magic and who is not? Is this not putting absolute power over magic in the hands of a chosen few? Can you imagine what the world would be like if those in power decided precisely who would be in power next?” He shook his head slightly. “There is no wizard wise enough to know who is truly worthy of learning the ways of magic and who is not, and simply because one wizard is more powerful than another does not make him more qualified to make such a decision. Magic is a wonderful tool, Harry, but the ability to cast great and powerful spells is not the same as the

ability to make good decisions. I cannot stress this enough, Harry: it is not power that makes a great wizard; it is how he wields it."

Harry was silent as he considered the headmaster's words.

"If that's really the way he thinks, why would he join You-Know-Who?" Sirius asked, frowning.

"That is a question I myself would like answered," Dumbledore admitted quietly. "I can only assume that Lord Voldemort offered him something significant in return for his service."

"I still wish you would restrict him from the school," Sirius muttered, glancing worriedly at Harry.

"I'm afraid I cannot," Dumbledore replied. "Without proof, my decision would no doubt be overturned by the board of governors, with whom Karkaroff has somewhat of a rapport."

"I hardly think that's necessary, anyway," Harry broke in. "Obviously I don't trust him, but he's been nothing but polite to me so far. I don't see any reason to ban him from the castle just because you have an idealistic disagreement."

"You are quite right, Harry," Dumbledore replied gravely. "But although he may seem polite and honest to you, consider this: since Igor Karkaroff has been Headmaster of Durmstrang, he has expelled no less than 14 students, citing no specific cause. Additionally, there have been 7 documented cases of students being injured so severely during classes that they are no longer capable of performing magic. Karkaroff himself has personally put 16 different students in the hospital for more than a week as a result of dueling demonstrations. One of those students was a 13 year old girl who has now been in a coma for almost a year."

Dumbledore's eyes had no trace of their usual twinkle as he continued to look at Harry gravely. "I am also nearly positive that it was Igor Karkaroff who led the attack on the Jones family during the last war, and that it was he who personally killed their twin three year old daughters." Seeing the question in Harry's eyes, he held up his

hand. "I will not reveal the source of this information. Suffice to say it was an inside source that served us well many times during the last conflict." He paused for a moment while Harry gave a grudging nod. Finally he sighed heavily.

"I do not tell you this to make you hate or fear him, Harry," Dumbledore continued. "I tell you in the hope that it will give you more insight into the man that you are dealing with. Igor was, at one time, merely an idealist, and our disagreement merely academic. However, that time is past, and he has crossed a great many lines since then. Do not be fooled by his refined demeanor, Harry. He has killed for his ideals before, and I have no doubt that he would do so again, should it suit him."

Harry was once again relegated to silence as he tried to resolve this image of Karkaroff with the one so anxious to help him. After a few moments he exhaled and gave the headmaster a solemn nod. Sensing that everything had already been said, he gave Dumbledore a questioning look and, at his nod, stood and made his way out of the office with his godfather. He broke from Sirius at the stairs in the entrance hall and headed down to the Slytherin common room, still deep in thought. No matter what the real story was behind Igor Karkaroff, one thing was certain: Harry had a lot to think about.

A/N Ok, there we go. I know I said that the Yule Ball would get announced this chapter, but it's already 12k words so I decided to cut it and deal with that and the second task next chapter. As always, thanks for reading.

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